THARLANE

DOROTHY COTTRELL

$2.50

THARLANE

By Dorothy Cottrell

For years men had met in Murger's Bar and speculated about Tharlane, that region of gaunt Australian plains which should have been used for sheep-raising, but which no one had ever been able to subdue. Of all the men who talked of Tharlane only old 'H.B.' — clever, furtive, cruel — still cherished a secret determination to conquer the land for himself. That fierce struggle, with its success and its final grim irony; the lonely, heroic lives of such characters as Sara Strathmore; the romance of Tommy the Shearer and the lovely Georgina; the tragic love motif of Sandy and Martha, — this is the rock from which Mrs. Cottrell has hewn her magnificent story. Into the carving of it she has thrust every ounce of her own power and experience. She was born among such people. She has lived with them, fought with them for existence. She has tasted their courage and their grimness. The result is not fiction, but life.

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DOROTHY COTTRELL

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BY

DOROTHY COTTRELL

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TO

ERNEST CHARLES FLETCHER

Dear Drover-Man:

As a return for all the fine tales I have had from your grey-bearded lips, and in appreciation of all the wisdom beneath your grey curls, there is very little that I can do. But ever since I began to plan this book it has been your book. In it I have tried to picture a drama on which I have so often heard you comment — to set against the immensity and indifference of nature the poignant and yet strangely passing lives of men... the one so vast, emotionless, cruel, lovely and eternal; the others so quickly ended — whose suffering seems often so needless and leaves so little trace — and yet which are in a way so much more than the march of days and nights that obliterates them.

All this sounds rather foolish when expressed in very prosaic type, but I have always been staggered by both the pathos and the immeasurable valour of men, both good and evil, as silhouetted against the great waste places of the world: still crudely outlined against the natural forces which — to reiterate — are so much greater and more lasting than are men and so infinitely less.

I have tried to show the life of men as it is in your outlands of the earth — a life more fragile than where they have built the buttresses of cities about themselves. A very primitive life wherein their strength is, as it were, poured out to make marks on the ground which the next rains splash away... They labour so doggedly, desperately to sow grain that is dried up by drought... They die and there is nothing but fading gossip to record their dying... The dear indiscriminate bush gossip which mingles the statement of last tragedy and speculation as to the birth of twin calves, romance and some triviality of labour!

Men are there... they are gone. But the seasons stay, the times of heat and drought, of rain and bloom. And yet while men are there, they are more than the ageless seasons with which they strive.

That was the picture which I tried to draw — and hence the 'disconnections' and the somewhat episodic character of the story, which may, I am afraid, disgrace me before all critics... And yet, disconnection is the fate of fragile things easily broken — and fragile and easily broken is man's life and loving where it comes into primitive contact with the most enduring soil.

I have told you all this because, although I want many things for the book, I want you to like it perhaps most of all!

In any case, even if you disapprove, please remember that your Small Person, who used to stand on the palm of one of your great hands as we went to see the terribly large cow, loves you as much as ever! and, also, that this is your present.

DOROTHY COTTRELL

THARLANE

PART ONE

THARLANE

I

To South-West Queensland with the heat months came the thunder, so that on a December summer night a violent electric storm bellied and roared above the ragged little 'rail town' of Murgan, driving men to the low-roofed shelter of Murgers' Bar. The continuous lightning quivered as naked fire across the darkness, or burned in sullen muffled pinks and lurid golds through the low-churned clouds.

Strangely angled wet iron roofs showed momentarily in bluish silver and were lost again in the night: muddy gutters ran with a rushing gurgle, their whirls of foam yeastlike in the intermittent flame. Frightened goats huddled against the houses for protection, and even the solitary locomotive waiting beside the iron goods-shed seemed cowed by the fury of the skies, its glowing breath beaten back by the rain into its iron throat: its thread of narrow-gauge railway to the remote sea seeming a futile effort to break down the primitive, immeasurable isolation of this, the 'Old West.'

In Murgers' Bar the lights flared uncertainly in draughts that hissed beneath the ill-fitting doors, and the roar of rain on the roof and the heavy vibrations of thunder seemed the prelude of some fearful menace — the voices of 'the hours of darkness when the powers of evil are abroad.' There was savagery in the trampling water, malignancy in the flickering, fierce-

falling streams of electric fire; dread in the thunder-shaken, reverberating earth.

The barroom was crowded: there were laughter and loud speech and rattle of glasses, the scent of smoke and its haze, the reek of stale beer, and the strange, pervasive geniality of men who had nothing much to say, and yet so few opportunities of saying it that an evening such as this was in the nature of a carouse.

Here were drovers who spent long days riding through the infinite peace of sunlight about their slow, dusty sheep, or more stirring nights under the white blaze of the jewel-clear winter stars when the cattle were restless. Here, too, men who 'went a-shearing' and whose 'sheds' were many hundred miles apart, so that they must ride to them with their pack-horses running before, across the miles of the open downs where the brown larks sang, or down the red roads of the grey Mulga Country where little fire-blue dust butterflies danced with the heat waves. Men, all of them, who lived so much in silence that to talk was a rare, shy delight, or a braggart ecstasy, according to the nature of the man. Simple, strong-bodied, somewhat childlike vagabonds for the most part, even the evil amongst them touched by a certain gallantry of courage, the stamp of the rigour and loneliness of their lives.

A land this, vast, arid, resistant of men, where life was fiercely simple, man's joys the primal ones of breath and food and common speech, his agonies the primal pains of thirst and hunger, heat and cold and death. Complexities were not; men lived and fought in the red dust on the immense hard breast of the earth.

In Murgers' Bar at the small centre table four old rovers were seated; one, known through all the West as 'Old H. B.' — seeming at first glance the malignant spirit of the gale — immense, pot-bellied, jocosely leering, sat at the table end, his ancient rain-soaked hat cocked at a rakish angle over one yellowish-grey rather piglike eye. Glistening drops clung to his silver eyebrow tufts and grey upcurled moustache, and rolled down his bulging bronze cheeks, sluicing thence along his treble chins to the great hairy expanse of his chest, revealed by his loosened oilskin collar and open shirt. A leg-of-mutton arm, terminated by a hand like that of a baby Titan, was planted akimbo against either enormous water-streaming side, and he lolled back in the chair whose strength he had carefully tested before seating himself, as some coarse Tartar prince might have. His girth was a full ninety inches. His eyes almost closed with a basking lizard-like content, and he leered jovially at his companions, while the light of the smoking kerosene lamps shone over him in dull orange and rose, and behind him through the uncurtained window flickered the cold gleams of lightning. When he called for drinks, he flashed a heavy note roll, and once dropped it carelessly to the floor, and a little man leaning on the bar looked at it hungrily.

Old H. B.'s companions were the full-bearded Drover Abel and his brother Alwin Crosset, and old Luther the Teamster.

'... An' the next was MacDowell,' said Drover Abel, telling the story of Tharlane, the reminiscent chuckles rising in his hairy throat. 'An' he got a few hundred cattle on th' place, an' I have met men who said that Old Backs of The Block did well out of

them for a year or two — until one day he an' Anthony Strathmore tried to steal the same beast at the same time an' reported each other to the police simultaneous!... An' then the police came with black-trackers an' camped on the run, lookin' for circumstantial evidence, until they'd shot all the kangaroos they felt like, an' had eaten the rest of the stock! That discouraged MacDowell. He said that a man might carry on in spite of thieves an' bushrangers, but not against police protection!... Then came Doolan... He put up a good fight on Tharlane... He worked as I've never seen a man work an' he got a six-wire boundary up between him an' The Block——'

'I hear it gave Old Backs a great deal of expense buyin' pliers to cut it,' said Drover Alwin.

'... He worked fifteen hours a day, did Doolan,' continued Drover Abel, no longer shaken with a great child's laughter, but telling of stark tragedy as of the everyday chance of life. 'An' he got the boundary up, an' then there came a good season, an' the storms fired the grass an' he lost the fence... He got two thousand cattle onto the run. Then the Pleuro broke out amongst them, an' he got a man to inoculate 'em, an' he did it wrong, an' the half of 'em died... He started in again an' the drought of 'eighty-three came down an' killed the rest! His life was heavy insured an' his wife was very delicate an' needed things he couldn't buy, so he accidentally shot himself out after kangaroo... Only he didn't make a job of it, an' it only wounded him. He crawled for miles, delirious, with a hole in his head, an' talked before he died, so the insurance company wouldn't pay... Then the bank took over an' put in their own manager...'

Old H. B. refilled their glasses; paunch quivering with subterranean mirth, and a flush in his bronze cheeks.

'It wasn't extravagance that ruined the bank's chances,' added Drover Abel. 'Macpherson the manager's name were — I knew him on the roads! If economy helps a man he should have succeeded... Even by men called MacTavish an' Mackenzie an' the like, *he* was called "a bit carefu'"...! In those days we had a lot of trouble with petty thieves. They were always takin' Macpherson's flour, so he wrote "POISON" on the bags in ten-inch letters, an' for a while it worked fine! Then one day he came in, an' some one had written, "IF IT WEREN'T BEFORE IT ARE NOW!" on every flour bag. His cook told me Macpherson said: "Weel, efter a' there's naething sae precious as human life! We'll no risk eatin' it — we'll put it in the wagon and tak it hame to Mrs. Macpherson and the bairns"... An' while he were on Tharlane he even shaved the horses' tails an' sold the hair! Still it didn't pay somehow...

'Now there don't seem no man with guts to tackle it! Guts is what's wanted!'

'Most enterprises require brain as well — though I don't doubt but that the idea is repugnant to you!' said his brother Alwin.

Drover Abel grew more ruddy of cheek and fiery blue of eye as they launched into a new and many hundredth chapter of a quarrel they had been waging for forty years along interminable thousand miles of stock route.

'You didn't sleep well last night, Alwin,' commented Drover Abel with heavy irony. 'You had insom-*nia*.'

'I did,' admitted Alwin. 'Of course it's incomprehensible to some: it takes a certain modest amount of interlect even to keep a man awake!'

'If it's a sign of brains to be out at three o'clock in the mornin' hawkin' the local roosters out of a pepper tree with a rake — because they ventured to crow as the Lord directed cocks — well, I'm glad I missed them!' cried Abel.

'Shust, shust!' said Old H. B., appearing in the distinctly unfamiliar rôle of a dove of peace. 'Now, drovers — now — you was telling me o' Tharlane!'

They had talked, in manner of bushmen, irrelevantly of many things: of rivers two thousand miles apart, as of familar landmarks in the day's march; of 'tracks' three thousand miles in length; of the closing of this or that road through lack of water; of stock losses from the heaven-scented purple poison pea that flushes the face of the plains and sends horses strangely mad; of Burketown lost on the hot salt lip of the Gulf, where the little leaf-brown wallabies came almost into the streets, and the rifle fish shot insects along the evening reaches of the salt river.... But in the main they had talked of Tharlane — as the land was called by white men — 'The Plains of the Sun,' as some dusky poet long dead had named it in a guttural and unpronounceable aboriginal phrase.

And Old H. B., whose full name of Henry Bart Henrics, men had almost forgotten, heard again the story which he had come some five hundred miles out of his way to hear, and which brought the flush up beneath his coarse bronzed cheeks.

Voices and laughter and profanity mingled with the thunder, and without the windows the lightning formed vast inverted trees of fire down the sky, but

few of the men turned even to look: they saw many storms; they had few opportunities for conversation.

Obese, scornful, holding in his unwieldy figure something of the innate, indifferent savagery of the remote lands themselves, Old H. B. heard again the story of Tharlane. The story of the primitive disaster of the pioneer in primitive combat with the earth: this man's work dried up with drought; that man's dreams rolled out in fire...

The crushing of the strong by that which was stronger!

So that Tharlane had become at last 'the rotten egg in the Government basket.' Its promise always a temptation to men: its peculiarities — of elevation from the Artesian Basin precluding blowing bores save on one corner of the lease, where incidentally there were such sand-beds that no one had ever 'got down' with a bore; of porous soil in the areas of catchment; of rampant irrepressible grass growth — always their ruin!

Many holdings had beaten men, or sent them 'queer,' here in the half-arid lands under the splendour of the sun.... But none had ruined all men who touched it as had Tharlane.

A thousand square miles of still unconquered earth, raped by, and pregnant only to, the sun and the rains...!

'An' h'it be lyin' h'idle *now?*' Old H. B. asked his first direct question. (It being his oft-expressed opinion that 'A man's h'only free with things 'e thinks yer don't want — h'only real generous with what 'e reckons yer can't stand,' and that, therefore, it was best to let information come to one through mild suction as it were.) His eyes blinked sleepily, veiled al-

most to closing; insolent indifference was expressed in every line of his face.

Drover Abel Crosset turned from the table and called:

'Don Barford! How's Tharlane?... Hey! Donald the Shearer! You come through that way?'

Whereupon there approached a wide-shouldered young man dressed in the height of Western fashion; his spurs flashing, his step that of a man perfectly and truculently sure of himself, perfectly at ease with his world, and unafraid!

'Good-night to you, Drover Abel,' he said. 'I was comin' to bid you the time o' night.' Then, leaning his hands upon the table, his attitude of truculence returned. His rather bushy, fair eyebrows came forward far over his narrow, deep blue, twinkling eyes. His chest swelled superbly beneath his open-throated grey flannel, his arms and hands were aggressive in their suggestion of power. Looking at Old H. B. he said, without waiting for introduction: 'D. Barford, the lightnin' shearer, at your service — I'm on my way down the river to undress a few!'

'I hear Dan's well — and likewise you rode the Laythorpes' Buck Jumpers, an' cleaned up the prizes of the whole show, Donald?' said Drover Abel.

Donald the Shearer raised his brows slightly.

'You heard truth!' he said. 'There's nothin' in hide or hair as can move me.' (Which assertion was correct if immodest, his slightly bowed legs, as he rode, clasping his horse lightly and surely so that its movements became his, his back curving in at the waist with its disdainful erectness!) 'I venture to think as I'm rather apt at the game o' livin', too,' he

added. 'There's little about it that I don't know like a worn glove!' Not ungently he deposed the now sleeping Luther from the chair and laid him beneath the table.

'You wished to hear o' Tharlane?' His voice, possessed of certain golden richnesses, wove pictures which turned Old H. B.'s cheeks to crimson. Pictures of waste land and waiting: waiting for the man with strength to hold!

In the tale-teller's speech were strangely blent traces of Scotch and Irish accentings, and even a Quaker 'thee' at times of tenderness (heritage from a grey-clad mother). A speech quaintly marking the welding of the nations in this the youngest of them.

'When last I rode past the place where the old homestead were, the young mulgas stood four feet high in the cow-yards, an' the scrub was up round the ruins o' the kitchen... An' then, from that little hump just below where the killin'-pen once stood, I heard a puppy cryin' — a troubled sort o' little cry! I leaves the horses an' creeps up very quiet, follerin' them little squeals... An' what think you I finds? A old red dingo mother with seven little red pups playin' in the sun afore an old log! But it were the eighth puppy as was weepin'!... You see he'd fallen over the edge o' a little washout, an' into the fork o' a dead boronia bush, an' then he'd slipped down so as his head was held in the fork with his little paddy hind feet just reachin' the ground. He were not choked, for he could stand, you see, but he were prisoner an' dyin' o' thirst. The old mother was cryin' over him, an' every now an' then she'd take him in her mouth an' try very gentle to pull him free, but all she could do was to stretch th' little bloke out long, an' he'd

yell so as she'd drop him an' sit back on her haunches, an' tilt her head with her forehead all troubled, an' think what the blazes she could do...! Then she squeezes up against him tryin' to keep steady on the bit o' a slope... *She tries to keep her footin' an' give him a drink!* He couldn't manage it — but afore I seen that I'd been thinkin' o' me luck in walkin' onto them, an' o' what price the dingo bonus were!... But I finds I put me rifle away an' is out to help that pup afore I rightly knows what I'm about! Why? I tries to say — but men be queer creatures — queerest under the sun!

'The mother runs away into the brush, an' the other fat little red chaps is gone like you'd breathed on a bunch o' fallen wattle balls! The one 'at was stuck gives a last little call, an' then just looks at me waitin' to be killed... I pulls him out an' dusts his pants an' puts him at the log mouth, an' then breaks off the bush 'case he might do his divin' act again... Then I rides on feelin' good because I'd not killed none o' the dingo family — until I thought o' all the little turkeys an' joey 'roos an' flapper ducks as I must have sent West by me kindness...! Then I wonders about a number o' things! But it were one o' them days when the purple cloud-ships goes sailin' through the white sun-bars, an' the cloud-shadows walks on the silver grass... An' — what comes o' wonderin'?' He laughed and pushed back his wild fair hair. 'I be goin' through Tharlane again right shortly, on me way to The Block to see Old Backs about a horse... *a horse we both liked*...!'

His golden tongue ran on down the paths of story, for Donald the Shearer had been born one of the tellers of tales.

But Old H. B. was thinking of the purple cloud-ships sailing through the vast white light rays while their shadows walked the earth, and of a red dingo mother feeding and troubling over her brood where men had lived, and failed, and were gone!

He outstayed the Crossets and Donald the Shearer even, and when at last he rose, his gait was unsteady and the crimson flared in his cheeks; but it was not only with liquor that he swayed.

Leaning forward over the table he said thickly:

'*One man can work Tharlane an' that's little old H. B.!* Old H. B.'ll work Tharlane an' yer'll all work for 'im!'

He shook a weighty fist at the room and its idlers. No one heeded, but as he lurched to the door, either by malice of his dark old soul or through carelessness of semi-intoxication, he trod heavily upon the outstretched hand of a drunken shearer.

The Little Man near the bar said of him as he rolled into the dying storm, 'There goes one o' the worst men in Queensland!' Men laughed, but they would not have done so had Old H. B. been present, for he was also one much feared.

The old man moved ponderously through a night musical with the drip of falling water; to the south — over Tharlane — the storm still flickered. Old H. B. could see the crimson glow of a lightning-kindled fire, burning unheeded in the unmastered miles. He seated himself upon the step of the ancient, sleeping railway engine, whose dark squatness and immobility was somewhat akin to his own. In the fresher air, the liquor swam up in his brain, blurring individuality...

Boastfulness, lasciviousness, cruelty, slipped from

him as he watched the low storm. He became a part of life: savage and primitive — yet splendid with old conflict! Planning life's oldest battle: the contest with the earth. Noblest of battles surely, in that it must be waged so long as men would live: that it gave life — not death. The most hopeless of battles, since its ending was forewritten, as man, who was transient, might not master at the last the eternal earth.... But, by God, he could leave his mark upon it! Exultation swayed him!

Then he began to sober...

He, an old man and evil — not that he classed himself as such, merely having a profound contempt for the virtues — he, Old H. B., had choice between ease and freedom, as reward of the hard-driven years, or of the earth-battle under savage sunshine and dry stars!...

... A battle fought out in the dust until he himself became the dust. Fought — *Why?* He answered the question, summoned by this manifestation of the multiple strangeness of men, more scornfully than had Donald the Shearer: 'H'all men h'are bloody fools!'

The remote fire touched with seeming of blood upon the fleeing storm-clouds: perhaps it sent the red dingoes slinking from their lairs...!

All that was truculently, individually savage in him rose now in answer to the indifferent, impersonal savagery of the land, as embodied in Tharlane. His vices even ranked themselves with the primal urge — to strive with the unconquered, to master the untamed.

He was sober now, but the dream held.

He laughed silently at himself! An old heavy-

paunched drover, with absurdly insufficient capital, planning to try what even the great companies feared! Prime fool in the world of fools!

Morning found him on the Tharlane Road.

II

Away to the south and west of Murgan, and Tharlane even, lay The Block, where at the moment the world was so hot and safe and still that it did not seem as though it could ever be — like it was at night! Georgina said boldly: 'I aren't a very little girl no more now!' (This is distinctly comforting when you have the bush to yourself for a thousand square miles or so!)

Georgina was smallest of the many offspring of Old Backs of The Block, and she sat on a flat red stone with her bare brown toes swinging just clear of the faintly yellow water of the Black Ant Creek, above which the river gums leaned, forming a long, winding tunnel.

Water-beetles popped up and down collecting silver bubbles on their tails.... And out on the flat below the killing-yards, Georgina knew that the frail lilac daisies were in bloom, thousands and thousands of them, making a four-inch-high, herb-scented forest of fairy lilac-coloured flowers.... For it was springtime-although-it-was-hot-summer, as the rains, that make the Western seasons, had come late to The Block.

Georgina was six years old, and that, of course, meant that she could remember only about four springs, and the exhilaration and joy and newness of it were all stirring inside her, so that she kept moving about on the old rock without really meaning to — and even though the bush was so big at night!

Georgina's hair was cut rather short all over her head, except at the front, where it came down in a

little smooth fringe almost to her eyebrows. Her face was childishly round, with a mouth that pouted just a little, and whose upper lip stood out a shade farther than the lower one. Her cheeks were just a little high, but soft and wide and full, without being too full, and while all the rest of Georgina's skin was a deep shining brown, which was at once dusky and gold, her cheeks were flaming rose and her small lips ruddy crimson. Her eyes were ridiculously big, and still round with childhood, but they were such eyes as men dream about, for from the smooth, strangely haughty-seeming, golden upper eyelids sprang a silken star-fringe, gleaming, blue-black, sweeping in a curve of glossy loveliness that shadowed dark brown eyes gloomy with shadows, flecked with vivid gold reflections from the water. And from the lower lids there grew reversed lash-circles that were not haughty, but soft and circled and appealing, and although they were not so long as the upper lashes they were even thicker, so that the darkness of her eyes melted delicately into the golden rosy darkness of her face. The soft, gleaming wings of her eyebrows just showed beneath the blue-black fringe of hair which lay tight to Georgina's small round head.... Her dress was of white crêpe, very old and only moderately clean, and so short that it showed Georgina's bare, firm, small brown legs almost to the hips.

... Sunlight flickered through the grey-blue, pointed gum leaves, and patterned the white satin of the new bark, and the reflected sun flashed up on the under surfaces of the gum trunks and branches. The faint new greens of the herbage and the yellow water through which the sun rays sank were all very lovely;

but there was nothing to be seen as lovely as Georgina herself, fishing for yabbies on the old dull-red rock!

For Georgina was a little quarter-caste girl, and when such a one is beautiful, it is with the beauty that no one can believe in unless he sees it: a beauty of crimson and black and dusky gold that takes away the breath — and you can't believe you have really seen afterwards.

At times a sunbird passed like a tilted rainbow across the creek, or a flock of zebra finches came down to bathe, but apart from the difficulty of sitting still, Georgina was very intent on her fishing.

In her left hand she grasped a short strong stick, and from the end of this a stout string hung down into the water. In her right hand was a small wire scoop on a cane handle...

Presently there was a slight sensation of weight at the end of the string, then a series of rapid, decisive jerks; then persistent weight — and twiddling! Very, very slowly Georgina began to raise the stick... Slowly! Slowly! and a pause whenever the twiddling abated....

Suddenly Georgina's chubby arm flashed up, the wire scoop cut the water a few inches from the string, dived deeply, and emerged with a glittering, scrambling yabby — a small grey and enamel-blue fresh water crayfish — in its belly!

... By the time the shadows of the branches on the yellow water were right under the branches, Georgina had forty yabbies; and with business-like precision she began to make a fire at the curved base of a great tree blackened by many fires.

When she stooped to tend the blaze, the frail blue, sharp-smelling wood-smoke curled about her, which

was perhaps as well, for the little white dress was so very short that even more of Georgina peeped out, velvet brown and chubby, and just a little roughened with much sitting upon rocks and other harsh substances. Of this seemingly embarrassing circumstance Georgina was serenely unconscious, and almost as indifferent; regarding even the crumpled white dress as an unnecessary appurtenance only to be tolerated for its beauty.

A less resolute and serious-minded infant might have shrunk from the idea of eating, unaided, forty plump, if small, freshwater lobsters. But Georgina was very hungry and had come out expecting to eat all she caught, and the fact that she had caught twice as many as she expected was not going to alter her plans if she could help it!

She was crunching as steadily, with her small face as lovely if slightly more crimson of cheek, when she reached her tenth crayfish as upon her first.

Nor was she wasteful; she drew out the sweet snowy meat with its filming of scarlet from each splintered nipper; carefully cleaned each shell. (When, for all assertion to the contrary, you are rather little, and have been left to fend for yourself, it is well to be frugal! And Georgina believed that once a thing was eaten, it was sure to support you, even if you did not want it when you ate it.)

At the nineteenth yabby, however, Georgina rested for a little while!

Then, very gravely, digging with her little calloused brown hands, much as a small animal would have done, she began to burrow a hole in the exposed wood-earth of a broken tree-trunk, preparatory to interring the remainder of the catch for future use, where it would not become air-dried.

She would gladly have shared them with some one. But, you see, there was at the moment no one to take them to in the untidy, low-roofed homestead among the pepper trees, beyond the fields of tiny lilac daisies — not even a puppy...!

Only the Backs family history could fully explain this...

Years before, Old Backs had been a wandering drover and cattle thief in the Far North. (It was said of him still that he knew more about stealing or dyeing a horse or faking a brand than any man North or West — no empty distinction!)

Old Backs' 'girl' had been half-caste Baada.

At night she had done her watch around the cattle with the men; and by day had ridden with a baby across her saddle-bow.

Often Old Backs had beaten her, but she had been happy, and they camped where the pandanus made green thickets and the crocodiles came out to bask on cold mornings, and the wild fig trees bore loads of rosy and cream, insect-riddled fruit...

Baada had gone everywhere with her old roysterer along that troublous remote coast; happy as only slaves are...! A dark slight figure, with her old pipe in her mouth, and wearing men's dungarees, she had made long reconnaissances across the illimitable plains of the Territory, or the grey deltas of the Gulf of Carpentaria — that she might bring news of stock movements and opportunities of theft to Old Backs.

On one such expedition she had injured her horse and had to lead it for a hundred miles of frantic forced marches... And when she arrived at the appointed camp, she was late and Old Backs was gone, and it

was a long time before she could get another horse quiet enough to carry her and the two-year-old child and the baby.

When she did get a horse, she set out to follow her man, and had followed, through unguessed hardships, for almost five thousand miles, and for three years: down into the strongly settled lands of New South Wales, where men stared at them strangely, south and ever southward, into Victoria and a cold such as she had never known. Then back into Queensland, where she overtook Old Backs, preparing to settle at last on an arid creek bank on The Block below Tharlane.

Old Backs had been glad to see her. He said, 'You're in time to wash up!' She began.

Presently he said — a little doubtfully — that he had thought there were two children. She replied, as she dried the dishes, 'One got very cold...'

Old Backs was sorry. He rubbed her dark soft ear and said, 'Never mind, we'll soon have another!' He kissed her, and she was comforted.

On The Block she had cooked and mustered and cared for him for twenty years, and each year borne him a child — with the careless amplitude of the sunny earth! Children, of whom fourteen were living, whom she taught, spasmodically, what little Christianity and considerable worldly wisdom she possessed. As years passed, she had grown fat and very ugly, while her skin darkened until she might have been taken for a 'full black,' and men called her Mother Backs, and she called herself 'the first white woman on the Black Ant Creek,' and was very hospitable.

Her spouse still felt the stir of old venturing, and

at intervals he packed up his conglomerate family of birds and dogs and children and went camping on the Tharlane spinneys or away to the Outer West. And Old Backs, although snowy bearded, was straight as a reed and clear of eye, and being (as Mother Backs knew well) a man who delayed for none, he invariably refused to return or to let any one else do so, 'even from the horse-paddock gate,' for anything or any one that was left behind!

Usually it was only a rifle or a blanket or a dog that was left, but this time it had been Georgina! (Old Backs still holding to his theory of the replaceability of children.)

Georgina knew that the fault was hers: had it been one of the four babies younger than herself, it might have been rather hard. But she was six and a responsible person, and that she had not been there was no one's fault but her own.

Yet, even knowing this, her tears welled in defiance of her will as she remembered the circumstances... She had been sent to turn the old night horse into the Main Run before they started for the 'walk-about,' and while she was doing it she discovered a wild bees' nest which was very easy to smoke... And she hurried so that she had only devoured one sticky comb-filled handful as she chopped, chopped it out with her tiny axe! And then carrying the mass of comb in her arms and pinafore, with honey running from the outer broken cells and splashing on her feet, and honey seeping through to her skin, she had set out at a run — thinking only of how pleased every one would be!

She had splashed through the shallow of the creek and then run across the fields of tiny lilac daisies, feel-

ing them crush and tickle under her feet like soft silk...! Then she had noticed how quiet the house was, and how far the sun had moved since she went to drive out the horse, and she stood quite still.

That had been yesterday!

In the food cupboard Georgina had found a big greyish damper, evidently left by Mother Backs (who would not have liked leaving *her*, but could not of course make Old Backs too angry or he would have whipped them all — which wasn't nice when you were going for a picnic). In the store there was plenty of flour and sugar, and tea and salt...

Georgina had said loudly, 'I will manuge good!'

But she had wished that she knew whether Old Backs would come back in one week or three, and she had felt a dreadful frightened sinking whenever she thought of the night... And all night there had been strange sounds and stirrings of the house that had made her lie very still in her fur blankets — and hope 'they' would go away...!

Altogether there had been so many noises that now, after the uneaten yabbies were safely hidden in the tree, Georgina was sleepy, and she lay down between the red rock and the leafy bank. And then she was all warm, and great waves of nothingness kept creeping over her, and once her eyelids flickered, and she saw the far sky with low woolly grey-white clouds beginning to move across it... And then she turned her face into the curve of her arm. Once a hawk called in the golden darkness, and a fish jumped... Then there was nothing for a long while.

When she woke, she knew first that it was cold, and that the sky had changed to grey and was almost

against the blue-grey tree-tops, and that a raindrop had splashed on her foot and another on her cheek...

Georgina hurriedly dug out her yabbies, rolled them in her dress so that it rose high in front now, and grasping its edges with each tiny hand she began to run!

As she went, big heavy drops fell, one, and two, and three... Then faster and faster, and a great sighing air moved across the world and the rain came down with a great trampling sound! It sluiced over Georgina and the cooked yabbies and the little white dress, and it bent the millions of lilac daisies and bruised their tiny petals, and where Georgina stepped her feet sank in the red mud and trod the little daisies into it — and the holes filled with the drenching, silvery rain!

The piled grey logs by the wood-heap were all blackened with water, and the home-driven drenched hens huddled miserably upon them. The yard was a sheet of rain-pitted water, while a yellow river ran under the gate and about Georgina's feet, as she grasped the latch and struggled with the yabbies.

Dusk was coming swiftly, and the verandah, seen beyond falling rain and spilling spout-water, looked very dark and cold.... When it rained, Georgina knew that the big chimney leaked and the rain hissed on the fire, and sometimes made little pools on the stone floor of the fireplace; little pools that boiled away and formed again. All these things had been very funny when every one was sitting and lying round the fire, but now they seemed rather terrible...

... Away to the west showed momentarily a dull flame of watery crimson, and then there was only the silver rain, falling in the gathering dark, and making its great muffled sound...

The man was lying on the home-tanned kangaroo skin by the fire, and in one hand he held a three-pronged fork, while behind him sat a great black dog whose eyes glowed and glowed as it gave a great menacing terrible growl at Georgina!

The dog was more terrible than the man even!

Georgina shrieked. A loud, abandoned shriek that was too big for her, and hurt her throat, and then she sank cowering to the floor amongst the fallen yabbies, and pressed her small cold fingers over her eyes, for she knew that, although she might have escaped from the Devil, she could never get away from his dog — and it was better to be killed here than out in the lonely raining night!

The man jumped to his feet and, because his eyes were blind from looking at the fire, he did not see Georgina for a minute, and when he did he swore under his breath, and laughed, then came to her, stepping lightly among the yabbies. He lifted Georgina and felt her shudder, and he carried her to the fire and set her on her feet between his knees as he sat on his heels, and he said in a voice that seemed to her the most wonderful she had ever heard, 'Show me your face, Little Un...' And because Georgina was still too frightened to cry, she moved her hands and looked at him. She saw a young man, fair and thick-set, with blue eyes and enormous shoulders, and strong blunt white teeth bared in a smile. He had a merry, blunt-featured face with thrust-out jaw and keen, deep-set eyes, and Georgina knew that they spoke only of courage and gaiety and that, although he might perhaps sometimes be very angry, he was not angry with her! Georgina's eyes were huge and dark against the paleness of her face, and she was

shivering so that she could hardly speak, but she smiled, showing the tiny milkiness of her own teeth, and whispered:

'I thought you was the Devil!'

'I surely am not,' said he, drawing her onto his knee and holding her with a strong young arm. 'Worse luck, I'm only Donald the Shearer — Donald the Teller o' Tales — come to see Old Backs about a horse... a horse we both liked!'

III

The rain spattered down the great Backs chimney and formed little pools on the hearth, which steamed and boiled away, and formed again, and without there was the drenching and gurgling of rain. But the young man heaped wood onto the fire until the whole room was molten with firelight which shook back from wall and shelf: from dried dingo hides in orange and black, in rose and flame from the tin utensils.

The great black dog lay down at one end of the hearth, the man in the middle, and Georgina sat with her hands about her knees at the opposite end to the dog, who was still just a little unpleasant!

'Tell me about your small self,' said Donald the Shearer.

Georgina only smiled, and looked at him out of the eyes whose upper lashes held all the witchery of the world, and whose lower ones were so rounded and wondering in their soft-fringed curves!

'I found a honey bees' nest yes'erday!' she said.

'But what o' yourself?' said he, regarding her beneath level brows (that were somehow the brows of a fighter and said, 'Devil take you, I fear not any one!' — even while his eyes and lips smiled at Georgina).

'I'm Georgina... It were a very big comb of wild honey — you kin eat some if you likes!' she said generously.

'Thank you kindly,' said he. 'But how the Devil be you here alone expectin' to meet o' the Devil-His-Self?'

She looked at him with the same grave, bowed face,

but the tears rose slowly in her eyes and wet her lashes and rolled down her small brown cheeks.

'I were *late* bringin' the honey... I thought they would like the honey...I ran an' ran!' cried Georgina. And suddenly covering her face, she rocked to the floor with great agonized sobs: 'I only e't a little bit — *with the mostest flies in it!... Oh! Oh!*'

'There, me Little Un, there!' cried he, moving across the hearth to her side. 'I never thought to rend your little heart with such mem'ries! An' may every fly you e't rise an' smite the ungrateful brutes — whoever they be! An' will I tell thee something real wonderful now? About meself, perhaps? Bless me, don't cry like that!... For pity's sake, don't cry like that, sweet, or thee'll surely bust!' he enjoined — not without some justification, for the flood gates of Georgina's grief having been fairly opened seemed like to rend her being!

'Well, if you wasn't interested in me, how about hearin' o' me horse, Black Dan?'

And thereat Georgina, who came of a house wherein the children might be sick and God would care for them, but veterinary science was at the finger-tips of each smallest Backs, raised her tear-blotted face in mid-sob, and asked in a strangled voice:

'Not the *real* Black Dan?'

'The very same!' said he, moving back to the middle of the hearth, while the tender lights danced up in his eyes as they do when a man thinks of the thing he loves. 'They be a-sayin' as it's a ill wind as blows no one good,' said he, his golden voice mingling with the firelight's gold and the mysterious sounds of rain. 'An' I proved it true with Dan, for he come to me through one o' the cruellest things in the assortment

o' cruel things as men do.... You've heard o' the great studs where they breeds race-horses? Well, they keep their brood mares there, an' nothin' is too good for 'em, an' they lives in the best paddocks, an' they're fed on the best o' hay an' oats, an' their water troughs is that sweet you could drink at 'em yourself — even,' he said, looking at certain utensils of the House of Backs — 'even if you was particular about such matters... An' they plays with their little velvy foals, an' their stallions takes care o' em, an' their grooms pets 'em, an' they grow very fat an' terrible conceited — *an' they grows old!* Then one day, maybe, the man as they've made thousands for looks at 'em, old an' heavy-bellied an' fat, an' thinks as their foalin' time is past, *an' he sells 'em to whoever wants a old worthless horse to flog in a cart or starve on the roads!* They as has thought it good o' 'em to let people pat 'em...! Well, onc't — it don't matter how it come about — but I was there, a lad, when that wickedness as I've just described was afoot, an' a hawker-man had just took charge o' a mob o' twenty mares...Very old they was, but they'd lived so well that they didn't know it, an' they was shiny as silk an' dimpled in the sun, an' they pretended as they was real young lasses an' right playful...!

Then presently, when they began to get a bit tired, an' for the first time in their lives they felt the whip, they still thought as it was a joke, an' kicked up their heels real skittish, those old fat brood mares did, a-tryin' to take it all in good part like... But it made 'em whinny a bit protestin' just because it hurt — though they was sure as it wasn't meant to! It should 'a' made a devil weep!' said Donald the Shearer, and the dull red of wrath crept up under his tanned skin

and the eyes were dangerous now beneath their sandy brows. 'There were one old mare as presently couldn't go no further, for all as she was so frightened at things she'd never dreamed o' happenin'... An' when she tried to hurry she fell an' skinned her knees, an' then looked round an' called for her grooms to come an' help her — an' got the whip again...! I were only a lad an' I had but a shilling on me so that I couldn't do much, but I takes off me saddle an' throws it down for her price, an' rides me own horse bareback, leadin' the old mare, an' it were no wise hard, for we had to go mighty slow!'

'Didn't the hawker stop of you?' asked Georgina, cheeks flaming and eyes ashine.

'No,' said Donald. 'After we had talked a bit he took a rest, as it were, with a broken jaw! *We* just turned about an' went the other way — me horses an' I. An' though I heard afterward as he had the police a-waitin' for me for miles ahead, his intelligence didn't rise to thinkin' as we might have gone back... After she got to know me, an' I fed her with a few bits o' sugar an' some peppermint balls, she followed me just like a old dog, the mare did — so long as I didn't make the pace too hot! It be funny what tastes horses has! Now, Dan do love a bit o' black lickorice better'n anything else — I mostly carry a supply an' he has a bit goin' to bed, as you might say, but the old mare liked peppermints... Well, I don't know rightly how she managed it, but one day a few months after I got her, I finds as she is goin' to have a little small foal afore long! I surely can't explain of it,' said he gravely, while Georgina also considered the problem with inclined head. 'I can't say whether the man as had owned her had made a mistake — though

them Money Kings would hardly do that! — or whether, as I do most believe, she just performed a miracle for to please me! But leastways she had the bonniest little shivery black foal a-waitin' to show me one mornin' as ever you see... An' if ever you see a horse conceited, it were my old mare! She raised her ears an' looks at me to make sure I'm noticin', an' then she gives a little bite to the foal an' noses him forward a bit, an' looks at me again an' flicks her tail, a-sayin' as it hadn't been no trouble to her anyways! An' she could do it any mornin'! An' I tells her not to brag so unwomanly like! But if I'd known, she had done somethin' a bit wonderful. *For not one of their corn-fed beauties with a little jockey aboard has ever touched Dan's time for a quarter mile — off of the grass, with me on his back, a twelve-stone man...*! O' course I have the knack o' handlin' a horse, a soft hand on the rein, an' a firm knee!... The handlin' o' man's much the same; lightness till you needs it, then strength! Most men knows o' Donald the Shearer — an' those who don't needs edicating!'

'I hadn't never heard except o' Dan,' said Georgina — wondering merely at the imperfection of her knowledge. 'We don't see so many peoples, though.'

'No,' conceded Donald, 'an' you seen me now...! I undressed fifty-one full-wooled wethers at Sunda's Plain last month in a two-hour run!' His ox-blood boots and silver spurs glinted in the firelight. 'There are few can swing an axe or draw a bead with me, none that I know of that can sit a horse or clash the blades by me side — but arter all there's not the equal o' my horse Dan this side o' sundown or under the stars o' God! His time for a quarter mile is world's time, an' he's done it — off o' the grass —

more often than I can keep track of! He's won me more money than ever I've earned — an' yet he's that pleased if I give him a piece o' black lickorice...! We've been mates together these seventeen years, Dan an' me!' Fire-glow beat upon his strong ruddy face, and lit gold glints in his merry eyes. 'We've won our way through the West an' the North, Dan an' myself — an' neither has aught but the other — nor wants it! Why, sometimes if I'm feelin' lonely a bit, rolled in me blankets with nothin' but the grass around an' the stars over — why, he knows! An' he comes up, steppin' gentle through the grass, an' by an' by, if I be still, I feels him nubblin' at the hair o' me with his bit-o'-velvet nose... Oh, we been rovers, Dan an' me! But we be still content, a-seekin' the gold at the rainbow foot... I never felt kiss to match o' his nose in me hair... I never seen the match o' the sun on his hide...!' His voice fell away to dreaming.

Presently Georgina said: 'Be you going to race some one soon?'

'I don't ask him to race no more!' answered he with a sudden head-lift of pride. 'But I'll warrant you he could lay 'em all by the heels yet!... An' he don't look a day over ten!' he added in a tone whose challenge held, Georgina thought, a strange something as though some one had contradicted him — when no one had!

'It be time,' said Donald the Shearer, suddenly smiling — 'time wee folk were in their wee beds! Where be yours?'

Georgina said reluctantly — not from any sense of the unusual in her resting-places, but because it was so warm by the fire:

'Sometimes I sleeps under the cupboard, an' sometimes with the puppies in the big box — they be away now... People who comes,' she added honourably — true, in spite of any fleshly yearnings, to the traditions of hospitality — 'sleeps in front the fire.'

Blue of the Saxon and the firelight's gold danced more gaily in the young man's eyes, but he said only:

'Well, here be one as won't! You stop there your small self, sweet... I'll tuck you right into your wee bit o' corrugated iron or hardwood — or whatever keeps thee warm!'

'I'll get my dingo skin!' said Georgina, pattering gratefully away.

As Donald gave her the final 'tuck,' he said: 'As I was sayin', I came to see o' your father about a horse — a exceeding well-bred grey horse as left my camp very sudden when I was shootin' up on Tharlane last month...'

Georgina raised a baby arm and indicated with unerring accuracy the point of the compass referred to. 'There be *very* big 'roos up there ——'

'There be!' said he grimly. 'An' my pack-horse were up there, too — afore he was took elsewhere!' He could just see one innocently lashed eye above Georgina's dingo fur. 'A horse branded Q.V.4 on the off shoulder, Georgina.'

'Yes?' said she.

'I was wonderin' what color he might be now, an' if that were still his brand?' (No one had ever tucked Georgina in before!)

'Perhaps,' said she — it was very nice to be 'tucked!' — '*Perhaps* there be a brown horse waterin' at the Long Hole as *was* a bit grey!'

'Thanks,' said he. 'We'll find him to-morrow — an'

then you can go stay with Sary Strathmore until th' family remembers thy little self.'

The long-lashed eye filmed treacherously. 'You wouldn't like to stay an' rest apiece here?' said Georgina.

He shook his head. 'There be woolly sheep a-wantin' me — an' five hundred mile to go!'

Before they were asleep, Georgina in the rosy fire-glow and Donald rolled in his blanket by the home of the absent puppies, she asked, 'What will you do when Dan dies?'

He raised his head and propped his chin on his hand, while a shadow passed over the blue eyes, then he laughed and said: 'Why, then maybe I'll come back an' marry the loveliest wee lady ever I saw, as have seen a few! I'll maybe come back an' marry thee, Georgina Backs! An' bring thee the rainbow's gold, who knows?'

'Thank you,' said Georgina, gravely content in the unusual warmth of her 'tucked-in'-ness. 'That will be very nice.'

(Old Backs wore — if not his laurels at least his sins with a certain endearing lightness. Next month Donald the Shearer received a bill, unheaded and unsigned: 'Dyeing and renovating one horse: Five pounds.')

IV

As Old H. B. rode out of Murgan in the hard morning light, he met Luther the Teamster... At sight of him, Luther stopped and called: ''Mornin', H. B.'

Old H. B. looked neither to the right nor to the left, and Luther, who was now only about two yards from him, tremulously roared again: ''Mornin', H. B.! H. B., I said *'mornin'*...! H. B., didn't you *'ear* me?' questioned Luther.

H. B. halted his horse for a moment. ''Course I did, yer fool.'

Puzzled concern corrugated Luther's brow.

'Well — well, why didn' you answer?' he asked reasonably.

'Because I didn' want to,' said Old H. B.

Luther supported himself against one of Murgan's parched ornamental trees and blinked pathetically in the morning glare.

'But, H. B., you ain't seen me for *ten year* — afore last night!' he wailed.

'An' I don't want to see you for twenty after today,' said the prodigal, kicking his dispirited horse.

As Old H. B. was nearing the first dusk and silver brigalow scrub by the Common Fence, a little boy with tousled, dirty, pale gold curls standing in matted spirals above a very dirty, freckled, and eager face, broke from the bushes, dragging a humpbacked, unwilling lamb behind him on a string.

'*Lemme* open th' gate!' he cried shrilly.

The old man merely nodded, but when he had rid-

den through, paused, holding a penny between finger and thumb, and looked down at the child, his double jowl bulged by the effort.

'Now tell me yer name!' he said with what he intended for paternal jocularity.

To his surprise the babe untied his lamb, and, the glow of eagerness ebbing from him, pattered away with a certain desolateness out of accord with his years — his little humpbacked lamb in tow.

''Ere!' said Old H. B., flinging the coin adroitly before them.

The small boy picked it up unsmilingly, hesitated, and said: 'Sandy.'

And Old H. B. put him by for future reference, as it were.

The equine Griselda resumed his motion, and seemingly Old H. B. went to sleep, for his eyes closed and he snored. But he never drooped in the saddle, and when the horse wandered from the fierce heat of the roads, Old H. B. jerked him back again, and their grotesque shadow walked beside them on the right, and then beneath them as the day flamed toward noon.

And, for all his semblance of sleep, the old man minutely noted the passing panorama of the wilderness. He saw a spiky-leaved yellow-brown tree orchid in flower against the hard blue sky, and the track of a dingo on the fresh-washed road: saw, in fact, almost all that was to be seen.

... After a while the horse knew that something followed them, but he regarded it as no business of his, and his mind was hopefully concentrated upon the luncheon hour, when Old H. B. would halt beside a stump and gruntingly descend...

After he had made his little luncheon fire, the old man dreamed as he sat eating.... A huge, jocose, bronzed bull of a man, who, when it had boiled, lifted his scalding quart from the fire with his unguarded hand, by holding the hand above it, and placing the finger-tips about the edge.

Against the background of silver brigalow leaves and the blue thread of fire smoke, with his tired brown horse nosing amongst the fallen purple cactus fruit, he made part of a picture typically Western. Typical and yet individual, for there was in all the West only one man with his girth, his sun-bronzed insolence of rolling flesh, and little arrogance of uptilted moustache!

He ate from his knife-point, and as, in his own words, he 'chawed,' his mind went chuckling back over the scandal and adventure, the evil and the labor of his life...

When he said, 'H'I forget,' he lied. The past lay to his hand.... Every watch that he had ridden about wild-eyed, pushing cattle, driven mad by the collective fear of the unknown night: every mile of his interminable thousand miles of plodding after slow-pattering, bleating sheep... It was all there! The red rifts of sunset across the plains: stealthy mist rising from the tidal rivers of the Gulf, when on dubious errands, he had ventured far into 'the Myall Country' of the Blacks: fires that turned the whole basin of the sky to smoking copper, fringed along its lower lip with light; a half-caste girl whose soft brown beauty had held him for a while, and then failed to hold, so that, although she promised to clean his boots so very carefully, he sold her to a drunken shearer a thousand miles from her home...

Oh, the past was rich, adventure-loaded, evil! Yet it was lighted, dominated by his passion for the land. ... The vast gold-dusting of sunset; ethereal silver dawn; winds that were the breath of immensity — these had been his loves. But over all he loved the earth; the land!

A love provocative, not of tenderness, but of passion for mastery. His sullen face was lighted with a lover's ecstasy in wading through the myriad tides of grass; by primal pleasure in beholding the naked skin of the earth. His fingers found a strangely virile, male delight in a handful of earth hot from the sun. All his wandering years he had desired to own and master a fragment of the growing earth — *and on Tharlane the red dingoes bred!*

The 'tucker' hour ended, puffing and sweating, he waddled after the brown horse and led him to a log by whose aid he mounted... And their shadows walked now upon their left through the heat of afternoon...

Although he followed one of the great stock routes — one of the trails of the travelling sheep which stretch their untold thousand miles across Australia — he had seen no one since leaving the child with the lamb by the Common Gate...

At evening he came to the boundary fence of the Strathmores' poverty-stricken, half-stocked property; although he was still a considerable number of miles from their more impoverished homestead.

Once off to open the gate, he found that his rather short legs needed stretching, and proceeded to fill his pipe, with the massive, fat-imposed dignity which characterized all his movements... In the clear evening the tree-walled road, a ribbon-red dust through

grey vegetation, stretched forward to a far breadth of gold, denoting an open space... and back through the shadow of a sandalwood scrub; quite devoid of movement and very still! The waiting horse, however, turned his head slowly and looked expectantly back along the track. There was nothing of alarm in his attitude, but he quite plainly waited for something to appear... Old H. B. looked, too. Nothing happened; and yet, being sharpened by much solitude to a keenness of sensibility contradicting his coarse immensity of person, Old H. B. also felt that there was something animate amid the silence behind them! Horse and man stood a full five minutes, but still nothing came, and then the man led the animal through the gate and fastened it after them, when, there being no friendly log or stump, the business of mounting unassisted occupied him.

Red-faced, and blowing hoarsely, he at last lurched into the saddle, and clicked to the horse. But, instead of starting, he continued to stand by the gate and look back along the road, obviously under the impression that his master proposed to wait until that which was behind them, and for which they had looked, appeared around the turn...

Old H. B. felt a sudden uncomfortable prickling in what was by courtesy called the small of his back, and then, cupping his hands to his lips, he bellowed: '*COO-hee!* 'oos there?' But there was only the serene, complete stillness.

So, grunting in half-shame, he rode on toward the golden open to the south... A flood of golden light through scattered, poorly developed box trees whose leaves flashed like so many small mirrors, the rose and amber of the trodden earth between them blurred

with smoke-like grey drifts of the galvanized burr. A box flat used as a cattle camp; there was nothing distinctive about its barren expanse, there being in all probability some millions, precisely similar, throughout the breadth of Queensland.

But Old H. B., who had seen the flat ten years before, knew it at once, and reckoned that he must now be about a mile and a half from the creek where he proposed to camp!

As he rode, the sunlight left the earth, and a faint grey-purple bloom veiled its red, while, as though for compensation, the tree-tops caught a stronger glow of the west. Then they, too, faded and grew dark against the wine-red sky, while the pale grey burr drifts gathered a spectral luminosity. The hour of intensest silence, too, was past, and all about man and horse there began the faint innumerable night noises.

One branch rubbed another in the slight cool wind which had come with the disappearance of the sun; an invisible kangaroo passed thuddingly; a bat called, and there were little scuffles and runs amongst the burrs and dead leaves! Above, equally, innumerable very bright stars came out.

Through the trees Old H. B.'s pipe moved like a golden, deliberate firefly.

Then, quite sharply, a long way back, he heard the gate close!

Again his spine prickled unpleasantly, and he was reminded of the night when, as a boy, he had taken the morning shift with the cattle, and away above the blackness of the scrubs the upended midnight moon was rising, and in its first light he had seen a big pale dingo following him, with silent lolling tongue...! He had held, even then, no physical fear of dingoes,

one or many, viewing with the contempt born of knowledge the stories of their attacks upon men; but the sight of the following beast, stripy in the moon-bars, made him uncomfortable... It had loped after him, pausing when he paused; gazing, not at the stirring, heavy-smelling cattle, but always at him — until in the first pale amber and grey of dawn he looked for it, and it was gone!

He had not publicly admitted the fact that he was 'scairt' then, and now, after forty years of additional wandering, and the grunting, unhesitating meeting of danger, his face was impassive as an idol's in the dull glow of his pipe; his little eyes sleepy and contemptuous; his heavy chins rolling composedly into his hair-matted breast.

Still his back prickled coldly — which made him wrathful! For, after all the very definite perils he had known, why in God's name should he be afraid now? For he was quite candid with himself in the admission of fear, and meted to himself the same measure of intolerant contempt he extended to the rest of humanity...

He was, he reflected, growing like an old woman who jumps at a mouse! Yet he was too experienced to reason with fear in any definite hope of success.

He had, in the years behind him, faced righteously hostile blacks without a quiver, and had waited with clear-headed patience, and without even desperate uneasiness, until a snake, which had fallen out of the tree beneath which he slept, decided to vacate his breast and go about its affairs...! True he had in his life been desperately afraid, but always of the intangible, the half-known. He could understand, and therefore did not greatly fear, either a spear thrust or

bite of a snake, but all the half-comprehended shadows of the border-land of life he held in shuddering, heavy terror. Madness also he greatly feared...

Still — Old H. B. assured himself, for his own comfort — although when afraid he had feared exceedingly, it had not been often!

This did not, however, alter the fact that he was afraid now, and he recalled the distance to Strathmore's ragged homestead, only to dismiss it as unattainable on his weary horse.

Faced with the necessity of camping, he wished that he had not left his dog with his droving plant. Then he shrugged, and was whistling with laborious gaiety when he reached the dark fringe of gums along the creek-bed: 'river gums' whose white stems showed faintly in the starlight... Just where he had remembered them to be across the years!

He rode up the creek for about a mile, to where he also remembered there had once been water, and presently caught the glimmer of reflected stars.

The Gum Waterhole was the private property of the Strathmores and he had no business to be there, but this did not trouble him. (He had once remarked that places where he was not trespassing no longer seemed ''omely.')

The tired horse, unsaddled and hobbled for the night, went clinking away, and on the hard smooth red clay of the bank, some eight feet above the still pool, Old H. B. made his fire — another little spark added to the thousands that trailed down the years behind him! He grunted at the thought of them!

Stooping was not such an effort as it had been at noon, and as always he prepared this, the 'night-fire,'

with a certain deliberate and unconscious pleasure in doing it exactly as it should be done. The selection of bark and sticks of just the right thickness and weight, their placing beside a rotted root-head that would smoulder on until dawn — all these things pleased him, despite the memory of the closing gate! And presently the little fire leapt up in gold and shimmers of violet, and little showers of sparks broke away across the night, which, by reason of the fire, had grown impenetrably dark.

Rosy reflections played over the satin-white gum stems that twisted above the water and along the red banks. And while Old H. B. ate, a little bunch of sheep came timidly out of the darkness, their eyes shining green in the firelight. One, an old ewe, stamped her foot at the intruder by their watering-place, but then their courage failed, and they fled huddlingly!

The horse crossed the sandy creek-floor just above the pool, and his bell went tinkling along the farther bank. At the very edge of sound a dingo howled... The old man finished his meal, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and emptied the bitter tea leaves from his quart pot. Then he spread his saddle-cloth and a thin blanket beneath one of the gums, rolled his coat for a pillow, threw a little dried cow-dung on the fire to keep away mosquitoes, and laid himself ponderously to rest. He said: 'Goose-flesh aren't never spoilt me sleep yet!'

The fire smouldered to dull carmine, and the stars grew brilliant again, while, to prove the truth of his words, the huge bulk of Old H. B. quivered with its own snores.

Then quite without sound, out of the darkness which had been getting closer and closer for a long while, the Little Man who had spoken ill of him in Murgers' Bar began to advance into Old H. B.'s fire-glow. He looked at the sleeping giant, and then at the roll of his coat where the notes must be; then he wheeled like a frightened animal and stared into the darkness up the creek... And with a bound he was back into the shadows!

Old H. B. believed that he dreamed, and rolled heavily, for it seemed to him that through a strange red glow he saw a man advancing... And he came with little runs and hesitations, carrying a short-handled axe, while the fading red of the firelight winked and gleamed on its blade... At intervals, the man swept the axe round his head in a fine circle, and brought it downward with a soundless stroke that stopped just short of the earth... At last he stood above the prostrate figure of Old H. B. and looked down upon him reflectively.

The old man lay with one stupendous arm beneath his head, the other bowed chubbily from his side, and drawn up; his round body curiously froglike in the uncertain light. He might have been a giant toad stretched on its back in death, his eyes just showing a glimmer of lifelike light between their lids!

The owner of the axe regarded him with deliberate calculation, then made several speculative passes with his weapon. Once the blade almost touched the huge neck; another blow was suspended above the rotund paunch. He experimentally cut Old H. B. up from all angles! Then with something that was almost a titter of glee he brought the axe down with all his force, but at the same moment old H. B. jerked his

head aside. The blow missed its mark by a fraction, and instead of cleaving the skull it tore a long gash across the sparse grey-haired scalp, and bellowing with rage and agony the drover scrambled to his feet with a speed he had not attained for years! Blood splashed across his face and he reeled, yet he would still have faced a goring bull with presence of mind. But the small man, intently delighted with his first effort, unnerved Old H. B.... Before him stuttering and skipping in the firelight, dimly seen through filming blood, was one of those things of life he most feared: madness!

He turned and fled: barefooted yet unconscious of the hard earth; grotesquely bounding!

The small man jumped nimbly after him, and Old H. B. ran, blood-blinded, pantingly screaming for help to the silent bush. The small assassin chopped again and missed — for Old H. B. was running as so heavy a man should never have to run. The next stroke of the little axe drew blood from his massive hip, and a further bellow of pain from his fat-rolled throat!

Then the earth was gone from beneath him and he went down the washout, crashing through the interlacing of exposed roots; tearing his fat flesh on the stakes, and stopping with a jar that he thought must have burst him asunder among the stones of the creek floor...

The certainty of death, and rage at it, too, illumined his brain as with a flash of light. He was to die here in the washout, tortured, bellowing, killed by the small skipping horror! Rage flooded out even fear, and, heaving himself up, he prepared, immense, clumsily helpless, and unarmed, to fight!

He felt fumblingly for his enemy... Then from

above him, where blurred stars showed amongst the roots, there pierced his consciousness a sound of scuffling; where he had crashed through the matted root-nets, the lighter man had become entangled!

The realization of *life*, which Old H. B. had laid by, rushed back to him, gilt with the radiance of the dream of which the small madman had almost robbed him. He ran lumberingly down the creek-bed and, finding a place where its bank sloped gently, toiled up it and into the safety of the embracing night...

PART TWO

V

The reason for Sandy's being called Sandy was not commonplace as the name suggests, nor had it anything to do with the white-gold, sun-faded tangle of his hair. Hence his unwillingness to answer Old H. B. at the Common Gate. A name that is a joke is somehow a hard name to say...

Mrs. Barwon had been found one Christmas morning lying in the sandy gutter of Murgan's one deep-tracked, pebbly street, lost in serene unconsciousness; and on one hand lay an empty bottle and on the other lay Sandy — very new, complainingly viewing his first sunrise... The neighbours had retrieved him, and removed from his person as much as might be of the road, some of which they feared he had imbibed in vainly seeking for nutriment...

The neighbours scraped the road off him and called him 'Sandy'! (As he grew older little boys threw bits of road at him and added 'Gutter,' about which he tried to keep his lip stuck out — to show that it did not matter!)

Altogether it was not an ideal entrance into life, being distinctly wanting in dignity... And he had understood from the time that Murgan considered him large enough to understand (which was really quite little) that you couldn't 'expect anything good' of one whose life had so literally 'begun in the gutter'! Even Mrs. Barwon said so at times, which seemed somewhat unfair...

He had learned also the exact location of the ill-

chosen scene of his birth; for it was frequently pointed out to him by other little boys born in more orthodox places. Sometimes, too, when he set out down the street he would see James MacSpee, or some other of Murgan's twenty residents, standing by the roadside, and indicating an imaginary object on the ground to a passing stranger... And both would be contorted backward and bent sideways with the fun of it: and then Sandy knew that the imaginary thing on the ground was *him!* And he would go round another way...

Altogether it was hard to keep even a hero of a lip permanently 'stuck,' because quite often larger boys sat on Sandy, singing, 'Born in the gutter, hoo-bloody-ray!' And then they would grow very stern, and he would have to say, 'Beg pardon — I'm sorry I were born in the gutter! *It weren't right of me!*'

Once, when he was smaller, he had gone out to view his gutter, undisturbed, in the moonlight. It was not to his mind a noticeably unpleasant place, and it did not seem that just having been there for such a little while should darken a man's whole life! Then he remembered how funny it was, and how it bent people sideways, and he clenched his small fists and kicked it — hard! That was also the first time he swore really well...

Old Luther Barwon the Teamster had long been wedded to Mrs. Barwon: but even Luther had reluctantly given up the idea that this necessarily involved any particularly definite relationship with Sandy. (Being a just man he bore Sandy no malice thereover.)

Luther was gigantic, and worn and stooping. He had one eye of flesh and blood, kindly and peering in expression, and one of glass — wild, blue, and keen as

an eagle's, which he put in when he was 'in town' or 'with the ladies.'

If men told him a joke, he was seldom amused at the time, but if they met him some days later, he was most likely laughing uproariously, and muttering 'Good!'

Luther's clothes were always ragged and he always explained, in bellowed confidence, that he had 'clear forgot' to take them to Mrs. Barwon to mend.

Of all the children of his house he loved best the eldest — nicknamed 'The Ox.' 'He is,' said Luther, 'a terrible good lad, are the Ox'; and then, possibly in innocent and unintentional explanation of his preference, he would add that he had been born when Luther and Mrs. Barwon were 'wagoning' their way up from Victoria sixteen years before, and that they had hardly seen 'a human's face' in all the two years of their journey!

The Ox stood nearly seven feet, and his shoulders were wide and his hands enormous, and it was Luther's boast that he could lift three times what any ordinary man could, although he wasn't 'really set yet.'

And in proof of this statement, the Ox would bend his back to great loads while Luther cried, ''Eave it, lad!'

And the Ox's wide face, which was so absurdly the face of a wondering bovine, only very pink, would grow crimson, while his mild blue eyes almost leapt from their sockets... He had been 'lifting things' since he was a child, and Luther was very proud of him.

At times the Ox was smitten by a pain like splintered fire in his chest, but Luther said that it was indigestion, and that what he wanted was corned beef like

they used to have on the roads — 'six year old an' tougher 'an raw boot!'

Although Luther went away with the wagons, early on the day that Old H. B. gave Sandy the penny, things had remained very nice at home, for 'she' hadn't been angry about anything and there had been some dinner! Often in Mrs. Barwon's house there was not — nor tea nor breakfast either...

Once Sandy had got so very hungry that he went to the tin where he knew the 'company cake' was kept, and ate just a little bit — and that made the hungriness so much worse that he ate more.

Before he had realized it there was only quite a thin bit of cake left, and Sandy's heart beat fast with horror! Then he burrowed out a nibbled-looking hollow in the cake; just like a rat would! But before it was properly finished, he heard Mrs. Barwon coming, and he forgot the handful of crumbs left in a little heap on the table.

Mrs. Barwon had been talking to Donald the Shearer, who had brought in a letter (for the shearers went about so much that people often used them as mailmen), and after she put the tea down, she went almost straight to the company cake tin.

When Sandy was called, his face was all pink and set. He said: 'No! I didn't never touch it — it were a rat!'

Mrs. Barwon's face was very red, and she said: 'Oh — were it? How about this heap o' crumbs?'

Sandy said: 'It were a rat... he... he ate some, *and then he ran away, and sput!*'

'It seems kind o' a poor advertisement for the cake,' said Donald the Shearer, 'for to have that effect on a rat!' — And his grey-blue eyes were dancing. But

Sandy wished he hadn't said it, for Mrs. Barwon did not answer... Presently as she moved past the yard door she fastened it without Donald's noticing, and then, when the Shearer was going, she said 'good-bye' to him without leaving the front door.

When she came back, Sandy was standing very still with his hands behind him. Mrs. Barwon stopped at the cupboard for a nip of brandy, then she had said, 'I'm going to burn a rat!' and she dragged Sandy with her to the stove — and always afterward one of his palms was puckered and palely shining, and the fingers of that hand never opened quite as far as did those on the other.

... In the twilight of this day of the penny, Sandy finished bringing in the wood and went out to 'play.'

He was very happy, for while the penny gave him ready spending money, he had a great accumulation of capital on his 'farm' — a little trucking paddock lent him by a friendly squatter — and stocked with lambs that were too weak to follow the travelling mobs, blind sheep, and animals otherwise disabled.

These oddly assorted contributions, the drovers usually bestowed on condition that he would 'swear his best' for them!

The men whom he addressed at such times were stern swearers and full of years, but, paying involuntary tribute to genius, they went shamed away when they had heard Sandy!

On his farm Sandy toiled mightily in the tending of sick wethers, and in inducing unwilling and embittered she-goats to nourish orphan lambs... And on the Crosset brothers' previous trip, Drover Abel had left him a fine bullock with an injured spine — a truly glorious bullock! For many weeks Sandy had

carted mulga and water to it, his small brown legs wobbling beneath the load. When his patient at last arose, it was to reward his care by earnestly endeavouring to kill him; but Sandy was active — he escaped and the bullock fattened. Drover Abel had made Sandy promise not to sell it elsewhere, and he was going to buy back the ungrateful animal at full market price when it was 'prime'... *And then Sandy would be very rich!*

Under the blue evenings Murgan took on a something of beauty almost. In spite of the previous night's rain the fierce day had raised the white dust so that it hung like a silver aura about the last homing goats: the warm, swooning air smelt of dust....

Then from afar down the Great Stock Road came a drunken ringing of fairy bells, and a sound of little hoofs... and round the turn came strange covered vans with light shining through their ribs! And, although he had never seen one, Sandy knew that he beheld a circus! — a circus that came to rest on the short grass by the dam...

It was almost too late!

A man stood at the tent door shouting, 'Come along! Only sixpence! We can't give a performyance here, fellers — but we can show you the man-eater! Come along, see the lion! See Leopold the Lion! See him tear his meat! See his fangs that have tasted the blood of a hundred men...!' And over his shoulder he called in a loud, merry voice that made people laugh: 'Keep the stew going, mother, I won't be ten minutes; don't forget me, mother; I can do some tearing too!'

'Only sixpence!' *But Sandy had only a penny!* Temptation cried: 'Sell the bullic! There's Jack Dans as wanted to buy him — sell the bullic!'... But Drover Abel had been promised!

Sandy grew scarlet with excitement and clenched his hands. In the crowd there was no one to help him — only the townspeople who knew that he would come to no good!

Sandy ran up to the man at the door of the lion tent, and the man stooped with his 'come along' smile to hear what Sandy had to say, as he held up his penny and stammered with eagerness! Then, when the man heard, he let his smile '*fall off*' his face — so suddenly it was gone! And he said: 'Get out with you. I'm here to make my —— living, not to run a charity show...' And then he put his smile on again, quickly, as more mothers and babies arrived, crying to them: 'Come in, come in! A educational chance you won't never 'ave again! A opportunity that knocks once an' goes! See Leopold the Lion...' And he called it so loudly and merrily that he could not possibly have heard Sandy saying that he would swear his best for him — even if Sandy could have been quite sure that he had said it, and not only thought about it...!

Sandy tried to run, for he did not want to be seen just then, but a girl, with a pink-and-white face that did not match her brown arms, shot out a hand and caught him! She said, 'What you bawlin' for, kid?'

Then she looked at his tear-blotted, sullen little face and asked, 'Did you want to see the lion?'

He nodded without speech.

She said: 'Wait over there by that bush, an' when I gets up and sings, "Oh, for the wings of a dove," you follows me — but not too close!'

Rain was working up from The Block, the heat grew...

When the last people came out of the tent, and streamed talking away, the man slouched heavily over and sat down in silence by the fire, and the woman served him quickly. And then she strolled away through the little fires and the belts of darkness singing, 'Oh, for the wings of a dove, a dove...'

At the lion door she waited for Sandy and they slipped in together! She lit a little candle and cried, 'Be quick!' Then they saw that the board walls of the cage were up again!

She said: 'I'm sorry, I didn't think he'd have put them up yet — such a hot night... Try a squint through this crack!'

Sandy cried: 'Oh, *let* me take down the side! They're not too heavy... We could do it!'

She said: 'No! we can't do that. I'm frightened of him!'

Sandy asked reverently: 'He couldn't never get through the bars — could he?' And she laughed suddenly and rather wildly and said, 'He's not behind them, though!... I sometimes wished he was!' And the candlelight on her face showed a bruised mark where the paint had melted a little...

Sandy, with his eye to the crack, whispered: 'I can see his ear — I think it's his ear...' When he went, he forgot to thank the woman, but he cried, almost surfeited with unexpected bliss: 'I see his eye plain as plain! *An' I smelt him real good!*'

When he got home Mrs. Barwon was awake. She said, half abashed: 'Well, Sandy, y' don't know how to fatten a bullick!'

Sandy was still.

'I tried to get yer a good price for him,' said Mrs. Barwon. 'But he weren't hardly worth sellin'... What are yer lookin' like that for? — Think yer mother won't pay? — Now, Sandy, y' *knows* I only borrowed the money temporary like in sickness!'

Her anger mounted: 'If yer takes it like that, yer won't get it!' said Mrs. Barwon, her face purpling. She wept. Then she was asleep...

VI

SANDY said, 'Maybe she'll be sorry when I goes away...'

As has been mentioned, Sandy was rather often hungry, but this morning he was — well — 'more so,' Mrs. Barwon having been 'curing her neuralgy' and 'downtown' for three days and the greater part of three nights past — ever since she had sold the 'bullick,' in fact. On this, the fourth morning, she had walked sullen and heavy as she always did after a cure, but said, 'Well, I'm stayin' home!'

... And then, just when Sandy had so hoped that perhaps she was going to get breakfast, she sent him to Murgers' Bar for another bottle.

As he ran past the lolly shop, and the butcher's, and the Chinaman's shop, he could smell breakfasts cooking... Mrs. Bantman at the back of the lolly shop was laughing and calling to her girls to 'shake it up,' and *they* were going to have bacon and eggs, for you could hear the bacon sizzling, as she called to the girls, 'Are these the new-laid or the cooking?' At the butcher's it was steak, with a whiff of pepper and the smooth scent of hot butter, and then the keen, poignant relish of white onions dropped into a scorching pan... Near the Chinaman's Sandy met the strong spiced aroma of curry.

'She won't never get breakfast if she gets the bottle,' said Sandy, halting in his tracks. 'She won't let me get it neither...' There were raisins in the Chinaman's curry, and lemon peel, and there was the faint 'blue' scent of rice!

... The air moved in a great clear river from across the brown and grey Common, where the goats were moving patteringly out to meet the fierce Queensland sun — nibbling and feeding among the sweet withered grass as they went... Galah parrots broke overhead in a screeching storm of rose-and-grey against the blue — going down to the seed-rich paddocks beyond the Common Fence.

In the whole summer world Sandy seemed the only hungry thing — and he turned back toward the house... sticking his lip out!

Several times he halted and wished that Luther was at home, for when Luther happened to notice Sandy ducking about the great wheels of the bullock wagons, he sometimes said, 'Hullo, lad!'

And Sandy sometimes thought: 'When I aren't here, Old Luther'll be sorry...'

But Luther was away bringing in the wool through the immensities of heat...

When Sandy returned without the bottle, Mrs. Barwon was still in bed... her huge form wrapped in a dirty dressing-gown, her face crimson and sullen in the midst of her dark, dishevelled hair.

'Yer been gone long enough!' she shouted as Sandy pattered through the door, his own face set and pink.

He said rapidly, shrilly: 'He won't send you none so early... He said you could send back in a 'our, then he'd send you some! Ole Murgers said it!'

The woman sat up, her coarse skin flushing still more deeply with anger: 'Yer little liar!' she cried thickly. 'Yer little liar!'

And then with a swiftness that belied her bulk she was across the room and had him by the shoulders.

'Why yer come an' told me a fool's tale like that?' demanded Mrs. Barwon, jerking up Sandy's small white face with her knuckles.

'I dunno,' he said, eyes dry with fear.

She bent toward him, face malevolent with cunning, smiling at her own cleverness. 'Well, I do — y' wanted yer breakfast!'

Sandy said nothing.

'Now,' said Mrs. Barwon, 'when y' comes back — with the bottle — y' can watch me eat mine! A empty stomach may teach yer t' tell yer sick mother the truth! If I was dyin', what would y' care? What do y' suppose I don't turn y' out for, y' ungrateful little changeling!...' But Sandy was running down the street toward the hotel, and, one good thing, he did not feel hungry now or as if he would feel hungry again for years! Instead, he had a light queer feeling as if he was floating, far, far up...

He had noticed, before, that being very hungry and then getting a whipping sometimes gave you that sort of rather nice feel...

Carrying the bottle back, he thought, 'Now she's cooked breakfast t' spite me, an' onc't she's had a few drinks she'll be sorry... p'r'aps — an' give me some... very likely.' But his tummy made no anticipative response, and his mouth was dry.

In the house Mrs. Barwon, under the stimulus of anger, was flouncing about with a very dirty, very lacy apron fastened over her gown. Her own place was set at the table, and an unusual but impressive array of the family glassware, appropriate and otherwise, arranged about it. In the sink were the dirty dishes of the week, and on the stove a large can of hot water.

'If,' said Mrs. Barwon, 'yer haven't got them dishes washed up in ten minutes by the clock, I'll lam' yer with the broom!'

'Ten minutes by the clock' were, Sandy knew, much more dangerous than ten common minutes, and he moved about the kitchen with pattering speed: only he felt so light by now that he could not tell quite where he was going.

Mrs. Barwon dropped succulent raw meat balls into spurting fat, and leered at Sandy, saying that something smelt good. Then into another pan she dropped a great mass of pale crisp slices of potato, and said, 'Fond of chips, aren't yer, Sandy?'

And Sandy ran across to the fire and bent his little body back to take the weight of the great can of hot water. And as he began to scrub the dishes he thought: 'I wish she'd 'a' let me soak them... She let me soak them *onc't* and they was real *easy*...'

It was beginning to get hot in the iron kitchen, and there was only the sound of washing-up and the sizzling of the fat...

Then eating sounds, and the wheezing of Mrs. Barwon's breath as she drew the cork of the whiskey bottle.

... Presently the crunching of Mrs. Barwon's meal paused, faltered. She gave a little giggle, and said: 'How y' gettin' on, son?' Then there was more pouring: and she said, 'A mother can't help bein' a mother, Sandy, even where she should...' And Sandy, breathlessly washing out a coagulated pot, felt a sense of coming safety. (He had known all the while that she would most likely be 'nice' after she had had the black bottle for a while, but generally she 'wouldn't never cook nothin'' then — only

laugh!) Now, however, Mrs. Barwon said: 'What's dishes? Come an' have a bite with y' mother!'

And she moved in a strange semi-circle toward the stove and lifted the pans, one in each hand, and poured the potatoes and meat balls onto a plate which filled and overflowed till meat and potatoes fell onto the stove and then to the floor, but she only laughed and said: 'Now, there aren't nothin' mean about that helpin', Sandy!'

And Sandy pulled his chair over to the table quickly, for it would have been such a pity to make her angry when she was so nice and had given him enough to feed two or three *men*... But now came the really nasty part of the flying sensation, for Sandy's chair rocked and rocked under him, and he had to hold the edges of the table. And, looking at the meat balls and the chipped potatoes in such golden profusion, he knew that he could not eat them, and the tragedy of it blinded him — *and he was afraid not to eat them because it would assuredly make her angry, and again he felt the little burnt scar on his hand*...!

Raising the steaming food to his lips, he watched his opportunity and dropped it down the neck of his little shirt, becoming a tragic child-parody of Jack the Giant-Killer... Then, quite suddenly, long before he had hoped it, 'she' was asleep amongst the half-finished meal and the ornamental glass!

Sandy wrapped up a little parcel of meat and potatoes, even carefully retrieving the buried treasure from about his person; then he set out through the heat-shimmer to where, fifteen miles away to the south, lay the swamp of Swans, on Arteran's Land, a great grey swamp with, in its heart, a secret island... where the big brown swamp-hawks wheeled over-

head and tilted up sideward a hundred feet, and down again, so that they cut the air with a little swish and rush of feathers...!

Incidentally there would have been neither swamp nor island had young Arteran not allowed his great bores to run to waste — but young Arteran did all those things which he should not have done, and left undone all those things which he should have performed.

Beyond the island there was deep water, five and six feet deep, of a chilly, secret, greenish white, spreading in a great lake through the tangled cane grass away and away for miles... Here lived flocks of the tiny plump grey-maned geese, and little spoon-billed ducks with shining pink feathers on their ears, and black-and-white cormorants who ate too much — then roosted uncomfortably on the rotting logs which lifted from the thick water into the sweltering sun...

There were little shirring clouds of tiny busy finches, with wee twinkly wings that beat so fast you couldn't see them! And hornets black-and-orange and purple-green, and slim wild bees and fat gold-pollened English ones. And the ash-grey and silver world was reflected in the milky-satin water along with rich splashes of sky, and to every breath of the wind the swamp shivered and changed and ran through pale gradations of grey and pearl and silver and faintest green...

And the lords of this shimmering, humming, sunny world were the great dusk-black swans with their bills of cherry red...

To-day Sandy was very tired when he reached the island — but it was only the first step of a jour-

ney whose wonder and excitement almost choked him!

... For every evening the swans would leave their feeding-places amongst the low grey-green sedge ten miles away to the south, and sweep up to the deep water of the cane grass with a mighty sound of wings, and trumpet notes wild and stirring and beautiful! Sometimes they lit unseen, and then later Sandy would see them swimming past in royal file with proud necks arched and raised in alternating grace of movement, their dusky velvet feathers lifted into a flowerlike crown above their backs, royal and gracious and lovely... But often he saw them alight!

As a rule it was almost sunset before they came, passing overhead with a great feathered rush and a drooping of superb necks... And then Sandy, swimming far out in the swamp, would watch them break the rosy water between the grey grass masses!

And once he had been so close, lying hidden behind a rotting log, that he had seen the water strike up beneath their descent and fall back on the dark satin of their shoulder-plumage in glimmering moonstones... Sometimes, too, he had peered at them as they passed, bowing, along a waterway within a few yards of him, the ripples moving out from their broad breasts like the wash as of stately ships... Or perhaps he would not see them at all, they came so late, but they would pass with a great sound between him and the great stars, and fill the whole night with the trumpeting that cried of far places and things that were not here — but somewhere were!

And sometimes on the nights that Sandy slept on the island, because it was no use going home, he would hear his swans talking among themselves, and

then from far, far up against the white stars other swans would answer them!

... And there would be a stirring and a rustling and a murmuring, and then a thunder as his swans rose, for a little way to follow the swans that drove through the star-filled sky... Away! Away!

Then presently the swamp swans had come back again, calling last long trumpet notes, and it had seemed to Sandy that they called, 'Not yet! Not yet!' because of the nests in the swamps where they were hatching their big eggs... *But now the cygnets were well grown, and when the swamp swans answered their journeying brethren, they called, 'Soon!... Soon!... Soon!'* And the wild sweet echoes broke back from the walls of dead timber far about the swamp!

Long ago it had occurred to Sandy that perhaps if you could catch a swan, and were not very heavy — no heavier than Sandy, say! — and if you climbed onto the great dark soft feathery back, it would carry you up and up and up!... Oh, surely it would carry you up!... First the great thunder strokes along the water, then the circled rise above the secret dusk and velvet of the swamp, where the stars were all caught in the black water among the pale reeds...!

... And, by and by, as they raced through the night, the funny-shaped orange moon would rise behind them and the flying swans would get all grey and soft and clear against the blueness of the moonlit air! And far, far down below them they would see the world spread like a carpet, and the grey-blue tides of the mulga, and the dark flashing box forests that looked like a forest of tiny stars when the wind shook them — or like a queer silver cloth... And you would have to hold very tight, indeed, to the soft stirring

featheriness of the swan, because it would be so far to the earth and the night wind would tickle your toes...! Then the tree-forests would be gone, and below would lie only the plains, spreading out and out, and on and on, like a pale sea that faded into the mist that was only distance — and became the sky... The great plains that the drovers told of where the wild larks sang... But the larks and the little fierce hawks who killed them would be all asleep, and the drover men asleep about the tiny red sparks of their fires... There would be only the great black swans beating through the fathomless stillness above the vast silver world...! *If you could catch a swan!*

It was late afternoon now, and Sandy slipped out through the green, cold, murky water among the ash-grey cane grass, with a little coil of strong cruel snare wire about his neck. The time to catch his swan had come, for — although no one would have believed this, he knew more surely than he knew anything else that to-night, at some signal, the swans would trumpet with a mighty shaken music that filled the sleeping world, and rise with a thunder that surpassed all other thunderous risings of their year, crying, 'Now! Now!' till all the grey tree-banks answered with dying, crying echoes...!

Sandy swam fast with the noiseless ease of a little water rat... And came at last to the waterway between a great stretch of shallow marsh, rosy with duckweed, and the deep chill lake that stretched away to the distant sanded beaches where on windy days a miniature surf rolled in. It was here that the swans swam back and forth with royal grace, waiting for

the signal and their 'night'... Dusky shadows moving like a dark dream...! And across and across this runway Sandy stretched his snare wires — at the height of those graceful, bowing, sable heads with their deep red, lacquered bills...! Cunning, cunning little snares! — making of the waterway one long trap!

Then, with his heart beating so that he could hardly breathe, he swam back to his island, drew his small body out over the smooth pebbles, and climbed to where the Cranes' Tree, long dead, grew far above the swamp!

He climbed lightly up the old decaying trunk, and then out along the main bough, where he seated himself in a crotch, his swinging legs crossed at the ankles, his hands resting lightly on the grey wood at his naked sides...

From here he could see the whole gold basin of the sky, and the great mottled plain of the swamp with its reaches of weeded water. He sat there very still and bare, and below him the cane-grass masses grew from grey to gold with evening; there were frail blues in the shadows, and haze across the timber lines... Then a deeper grey crept up and up, and only the loose-pollened feathery grass-heads caught the light and were golden rosy, or the occasional top of yarran or silver brigalow gleamed like metal... Ducks called, hurrying home down the hidden waterways... The little grey clouds of finches whirred off to roost, while belated bees hastened uncertainly, looking like wandering fiery sparks.

Then the grey shadows swallowed up the world, while the water among the pale grass clumps became blood-red, and the overarching sky an amber-wine

that deepened to ruby-fire along the west... And then the swans came, their dark plumage crimsoned by the last light as they passed in superb ranks overhead, and then, as they dropped through the shadow-line, turning to velvet black against the south sky where far away purple clouds were banking.

Sandy slipped down from his tree and ran to the water: and now, through some change in the temperature of the air, it felt velvet warm as he entered it.

He swam through reflected fire that changed as he went from ruby to deep amber, even as the cane grass changed from pallid bone color to dusky lilac, and then all the world was bathed in tones of grey again, and the first stars were reflected in the waterways whose surface was broken by a thousand mysterious ripplings and little uneven rises.

There were quick running rustles in the grass tangles, and clear tinkling splashes that might have been twenty feet or a half-mile away.

Sandy swam to where the waterway with the little snares came in from the marshes of duckweed, and there he climbed out onto a wide box log and sat still as death, and the stars seemed very near and the swamp terribly mysterious and somehow menacing because of this thing that he was daring to do...

An hour passed, and the clouds that had lain low and purple in the south at sunset began to move across the stars like dark wool... Then a great glow to the east told of the coming moon.

Sandy watched it rise orange and huge and strange amongst the cane-grass feathers, then grow hard and silver as it sailed up to meet the cloud-banks... But before it reached them, with a gentle hushing of

water and a faint, feathery stirring, the first of the swans came drifting down the waterway!

The moon touched the cloud-banks and vanished, but away through the dead timber its light still lay like phosphorescent fire.

And suddenly there was a stir, a sharp twang, and then a mighty struggle... and a frightened thunder and threshing of great wings as the swans smote their way up out of the narrow water lane...! But the first beating and churning and floundering continued even more fiercely, and the hammering of wild wings on the water sounded like the reports of guns! Wild, terrifying alarms!

Then white glory flooded the swamp again. And Sandy dropped into water all white with moonlight, and swam toward the sounds of struggle...

And there, caught by his long, soft-feathered neck, his great wings beating helplessly and showing their broad white markings as they tore vainly at the air and bruised their beauty on the harsh tangled cane grass, was a mighty swan... A swan more huge, more wonderful than even Sandy had believed them to be!

With the daring of victory, with the exquisite haste of the hunter, and all the miracle of the night before him, he flung himself upon the great, warm-feathered, quivering back! And the featheriness of it made him drunk! His little unbelieving hands grasped at it caressively: the warm bird smell tickled his straining nostrils.

Then he reached up along the great soft neck, and his stolen pliers cut the taut wire of the noose!

... The royal head with its bill of ruby fell limply along the water, the wings spread themselves in a last dark caress across the milky surface... and the

great swan was dead, floating like a giant black flower.

Sandy said, 'Gee up!' — but not quite in the voice that he had meant to say it...

A scurry of summer rain drove across the world, and to the east formed a pallid rapidly dissolved lunar rainbow. Then, save for the drip, drip, of falling drops, the utter silence of fear held the swamp.

Later, Sandy, lagging home under the spur of hunger, said:

'Maybe some one would 'a' been sorry I'd goed away...' Then as one convicted of unreasonableness, he added, 'You can't never tell...'

VII

HAVING reached a doctor, Old H. B. had spent the three weeks since the assault upon him in healing his wounds and planning his vengeance upon the thing which had dared almost to rob him of his dream!

For the sake of vengeance he had altered a little the story of that night by the Gum Waterhole. For you cannot punish the mad; you can only have them 'cared for'!... And yet pain inflicted by madness stings as keenly! Death, dealt of madness, robs as surely! Be it sane or mad, a man must hate that which sends him bellowing calf-like through the night...!

Old H. B., with an audience such as even he, gatherer of scandal, had never before possessed, sat in the crowded brown gloom of the Bottletrees Court-House, and stuck his legs straight and wide before him, while he told his story. The effect of the white bandage about his head was something that of a fez, and beneath it his huge bronzed face, wreathed in the thin fumes of a cigarette, might have been that of some portly Eastern potentate. But although, when appalled by the sheer dutiful sameness of Mrs. Henrics, his wife, he had in the past admitted to thinking kindly of the institution of ''airums,' he would not at the moment have changed places with any of the lords of Asia, for he was weaving a net to lead a man to punishment such as you may not vent upon the mad!

'H'I 'ad felt sort of h'uneasy comin' h'along the road,' he repeated, with deep unctuous pleasure of

craftsmanship; his little fatty eyes very brilliant, and his moustache rolling with the movement of his lips.

Then, with the art born of smouldering anger, he brought to his hearers the loneliness of the little camp on the creek-bank where the rose firelight moved on the twisted white trunks, and everything else was dark!

... He had told them also of the roll of notes shown carelessly in Murgers' Bar — and of the closing gate in the dusk! For you *can* punish a man for attempted murder for robbery...

'... An' me fire began to burn h'out, an' I suppose 'e kep' creepin' closer... an' when I woke 'e was standin' aside me with the h'axe...'

There is something so inconsequent in the wandering destructiveness of a lunatic; it lacks motive! The story which now he told was the story that his hearers would of themselves have wished to believe — rather than that which was the truth. Madness lacks plot; is purposeless. Purposeless, it might be said, are the wanderings of a ghost, and 'spook' stories were most dear to them! But even ghosts conform to certain definite rules of conduct. (Hence the respect of both Old H. B. and his audience for the dead, and their care to avoid those other things which, apart from being 'an unrespected dead,' not unnaturally annoyed ghosts: such as sitting on their graves 'talkin' careless,' for instance, passing them at midnight, or burying their bodies in the garden!) Oh, you could always find some well-established cause for the action of a ghost!

Every good story has a well-established plot. Definite drama! H. B.'s present story pleased his hearers as a mere tale of madness could not have done. It

sounded like 'a true Bill.' His story was weaving punishment for a man as a mere story of madness could not have done!

Even as, acutely suffering, he had struggled weakly after his horse on the night that the washout saved his life, he began to tell it in imagination.

Feeling the sharp-edged, blood-clotted rent in his scalp, he sickened physically, but knew it as a strand of the web of vengeance! This pleasure of weaving revenge (for even in his fierce pain a pleasure it indubitably was) alternated with sheer trembling, scalding rage that he, Old H. B., had been sent bellowing through the night like a heifer with the dingoes at her flanks, shaking his stomach like a sheep-bell! He had, even as he fled, ached to be able to kneel upon his tormentor and knead out his life like an angry old bull! The mere picturing of it had brought him desire exquisite as fine pain... By God! Old H. B. had reflected, snorting through the dark, the net should be a perfect one!

Now, sitting on the court-house bench, he told of how the man had stood there with the axe.

''E said, "Give me what's on yer," an' h'I said, "H'I 'aven't got nothin'," an' 'e said, "Yer're a liar, I saw yer showin' off with yer notes in Murgers' Bar"...' The tale, rounded, murderous, desirable, progressed to its climax.

''E said, "H'I'll throw yer in the water'ole to rot for th' fish — an' 'ose goin' to bother?" and h'I made a 'it at 'im, an' 'e caught me h'over the 'ead, and then on the 'ip, an' bein' h'unh'armed, h'I turned an' run, an' all the while h'I could see his face just be'ind me ... grinnin'!'

'You'd know 'im again, H. B.?' a man in the well of

the court, asked — almost reverently. After all that had preceded his flight into the darkness, what could be more necessary, more obvious, than that Old H. B. should know him? His full fierce face purpled malevolently with the intensity of the moment.

'*Know 'im?*' he said. 'H'I'd know 'im in the smoke of 'ell!'

He had been in court-houses before; but never in the guise of hero: he liked his new rôle. Yet, in the main, he gave his story deliberately, puffingly contemptuous of the opposing lawyer, who, noting the heavy flush in Old H. B.'s bronzed cheeks, asked brightly:

'You're in the habit of taking a glass or two, are you not, Mr. Henrics?'

Old H. B. rolled a sleepy eye in his direction.

'Yes — when h'I'm h'in luck,' he said.

'You had a glass or two on the way to the court, did you not, Mr. Henrics?'

'Yes,' said Old H. B., with his infinite deliberation. 'An' if 'eaven's good to me h'I'll 'ave h'another one h'or two h'on the way h'out!'

(Later he saw this very dialogue immortalized in a comic paper, and felt that he had given something to literature.)

Under cross-examination he retold his story perfectly, without overemphasis; without seeming of more than natural resentment. He had been in Murgan on the night before the attempted murder. There had been a large crowd in the room: in paying for drinks he had accidentally dropped his whole roll of notes.

'How much?'

'H'about fifty pounds, h'I believe,' said Old H. B.,

smiling crookedly. 'Better men than me h'even 'ave been murdered for ten an' less.'

Asked had he seen any one following him when he left the town, he answered 'No,' but he had spoken to a child whose statement had been obtained. Later, he had felt sure that he was followed because of the actions of his horse... He remembered his notes, and, when the follower had not appeared, he was worried, but then had called himself 'a h'old woman!' He had been up most of the previous night, and was 'dead beat,' wherefore, in spite of the wish that he had a dog with him, he slept heavily, and was not wakened until the time of the attack.

Asked if he believed robbery to be the motive, he said, with sudden twinkling of his heavy-lidded eyes and a slight shrug of heavy shoulders, that he saw no reason to doubt it. He would ''ate' to think that he 'ad a h'enemy!'

'Why, then, was the robbery not attempted without the much graver crime of murder?'

Old H. B. said, with guttural deliberateness: 'Me notes was h'in me coat, which was h'under me 'ead; that bein' 'eavy, it c'd 'ardly be removed without wakin' me — except with h'a h'axe h'or like h'instrument.'

Why, then, when he ran, had not his assailant taken the coat and gone?

Old H. B. assumed he had felt that he would be more comfortable to have Old H. B., the principal piece of 'h'evidence,' 'fattenin' them little carp!'

He was allowed to leave the box as the prisoner, John Terchant, was for the moment too ill to appear.

Abel Crosset (drover) was called. The Drover Abel was a quick-tempered man, fond of his work. He

testified that he was here at great personal inconvenience, that his sheep would be in 'a God-blasted mess,' and that if his candid opinion *was* asked, under the shelter of the Court, it was that the man who disposed of Old H. B. should receive the Noxious Pests Bonus! Being asked to keep to the matter in hand, he said that on the night in question he and his brother Alwin had been talking with Mr. Henrics and had seen him drop his notes as described, although at the time he, Abel, had thought it a 'bit of damfangled swank,' comparable to carrying a nailbrush and such-like abominations! (He was again asked to keep to the matter in hand, but said that he had no more to say — unless he was permitted to condole with the prisoner on the failure of a worthy effort.)

All of this was duly filed in the dusty records of the little court (where you may read it still) and the old men tell of it in endless detail (if you wish to listen).

John Murgers, hotel-keeper, was called, and said that on the same night referred to by Drover Abel, he had seen Mr. Henrics leave the bar-room, and as he did so a little man by the bar had made a derogatory remark which caused considerable laughter.

What had he said?

John Murgers believed that he had said that Mr. Henrics was the worst man in the Colony. He, John Murgers, had contradicted this.

Albert Cummings (shearer) had also heard the derogatory remark, but did not remember John Murgers contradicting it — had in fact a hazy impression that John Murgers had advised the Little Man to 'make it the universe.'

(John Murgers thereupon knocking the Shearer out, his testimony was 'closed.')

Sandy Barwon (child), when questioned by his mother after the assault, had said that a small man had stopped him and asked if the fat old man had taken the Tharlane Road or the River Road? He had told him the Tharlane Road.

James MacShannon (officer of police) said that he had been on the scene of the attack with one of his boys some twenty-four hours after the occurrence of the crime. They had seen the camp site, the tumbled blankets (further disturbed by the crows), and the dead fire. Tracking was difficult, as a flock of sheep coming to water had blurred the traces. They had, however, found the footprints of a little man and his dog following those of the complainant from Murgan, and halting when he had halted. The same tracks had circled about the camp at a little distance, and there were evidences of the man who made them having stood behind several trees for considerable periods... he had shifted his feet until the dust was all loosened! They also found where he had tied the dog and, later, had gone back for it.

The officer called his black tracker, Julius Cæsar, apelike, darkly beaming, and yet frightened, and with many gestures he illustrated how he had searched — here by a log, here by a stump that was scratched, here by an overturned stone.

The bloody axe he had found a mile up the creek, but no tracks, because the man who carried it was 'bery cleber' and had walked in the water. At the far end of the hole he had found tracks; but not of the man who had followed the big man so far. These, too, were tracks of 'a little feller,' but they had come down to the water along the creek and then gone away again. 'The Boss' had said that it was only

some one getting a drink when he was 'thirsty feller' and had not let Julius Cæsar trail it any more. Julius Cæsar had gone back along the hole, and down near the road he had picked up the tracks of the first man — 'running fast and afraid,' for he had run into things, here a branch, there a stump...

He, Julius Cæsar, had followed for miles and then 'lose 'em' where the wind swept out the tracks and no man could follow! He tilted his head upon one side and giggled shyly.

The police officer took up the tale. He had been discouraged by Julius Cæsar's losing the tracks, but had heard three days later that there was a man at the Great Mirage Shed who acted suspiciously, and talked in his dreams of creeping upon a sleeper and of bloody axes — not in itself unusual since many a good man 'paid for a holiday,' but in this case suspicious. He had hurried to the scene and had arrested the prisoner. The prisoner's boots corresponded with those worn by the man who had followed the plaintiff and had stood behind the trees as described. Old H. B. leaned back, sighing — for the web was more perfect by far than he had hoped in fierceness of hating even!

Now there was a hush in court, and between two constables, there entered a little white-faced, frightened-eyed man, trying nervously to get his manacled hands into his frayed trouser pockets. Old H. B. leant forward, bulging himself against his knees in his intensity of emotion — chaos in his heart. He grunted vibrantly.

The Little Man gave an indistinguishable name. When asked for his birthplace, he said agitatedly

that he did not know, but he thought that he had had one somewhere. He had no relatives, but he had a dog. Asked where he had been on the 4th instant, he said that he did not know, but on the night of the big storm he had been in Murgers' Bar. He stuttered, he was heckled by the Crown Prosecutor, he saw the net about him, and its perfection. His story took long in telling, but it was not really long.... He had a very good dog and for years men had talked about how good it was, and Old H. B. had once written to him and offered to buy it. When he would not sell it, Old H. B. had said that the dog was 'a killer' and no good... He had said it to every one! (Even in this, the hour of his extremity, the Little Man's cheeks grew hot!) H. B. had dared to say it — when the dog was good!... Then he was in Murgers' Bar and down on his luck and Old H. B. flashed his notes, and when he went out he, the Little Man, had said, 'There goes the worst man in Queensland!' Now, looking at the Judge, he muttered confusedly, 'It sort of slipped out — I begs Old H. B.'s pardon...' He stumbled on with his story... He had kept thinking of the notes. He had followed Old H. B. planning to 'sneak' the notes.

'... I never dreamed to hurt him — I hadn't never even *read* about murders if I c'd 'elp it...' He had, so he said, crept up close to the fire, but when he saw the coat under the sleeper's head, he was afraid to try — *and then he heard some one coming!* He had run back into the dark and watched. A man with an axe had come (the Little Man's voice rose almost to a cry) '... He swung the axe and cut and chopped... and chopped right into his brains and the axe was red, and I ran and got the dog and ran...!' He looked about

him, whispering, '*I ran!*' (He was led from the dock to a seat.)

Came to Old H. B. the question: 'Is this the man who assaulted you on the 4th of December at the Gum Waterhole on Strathmore's Creek?'

Old H. B. leant further forward, suddenly trembling. He felt again the sickening smoothness of his skull touched through the rent in his scalp; the ludicrous bounding indignity of his flight. He cared not whether the man had been sane or mad; nice points such as responsibility did not touch Old H. B. and it was not for that he hesitated.

But was this the man? He had been tortured, shamed, sent bounding through the night — by some one. He wanted only vengeance, and he actually shook with rage against that which had hurt him. The thought that his assailant should go free suffocated him and set his fat old heart beating so that it gave him pain. He blew hard, looking at the prisoner. All evidence pointed to his being the man. He might be the man — but no recollection of that moment's horror was stirred by his face. That he should have been guilty and go free was insupportable. And if he, Old H. B., said, 'We must have further proof: I am not sure,' his web was broken irreparably, for where could they get further proof? Any there might have been had blown away with the dust...

His choice was, in effect, either to let the man go, saying, 'This is not the man,' or to swear to his recognition.

Old H. B.'s face had grown crimson with his mental upheaval. Men thought him on the verge of apoplexy.

There was no one in all the waiting court to whom

he could appeal. He had cut himself off from the possibility of appealing to any one's judgment. So far as they knew, the man's image was seared on his soul forever. The torture of his indecision lay in the fact that the Little Man might easily be that which had come hopping out of the night at him. Reason asserted that he was. Instinct, the undependable yet haunting, declared that he was not.

Old H. B. rolled on his chair in his ponderous excitement, and the wound in his hip sent a burning flare of pain up to his brain, which had been so exhilarated with triumph.

The police thought that this was the man; he might well be the man — for that little which H. B. had seen of his assailant was suddenly become blurred and, by God, he was not going to get away with it if he was the man; he could learn to make a meat-block of some one else! The fumes of whiskey and rage rose together in Old H. B.'s brain and he wondered why he had ever doubted that this was his enemy. Leaning forward, he shook his large clenched fist at the little bird-like prisoner:

'*Py God, yess,*' whispered Old H. B. 'Py God, y' little devil!'

There was a roar of excitement from the crowd; a thin, stammering protest from the Little Man, and the proceedings dragged. The Crown Prosecutor characterized the Little Man as a low and cold-blooded murderer, and Old H. B. felt no faintest tendency to shrink from the prisoner's eyes: his decision made, he was even supported by the righteous glow of the artist whose work is well done.

The prisoner was found guilty by the jury and

sentenced to thirty years' penal servitude by the Judge — who wished to make an example of him and that the example might be convincing...!

The prisoner spoke confusedly of his dog and who would care for it? But no one heeded, because the gold evening was suffocatingly hot and the hotels near by.

It was only when, much later, he reached his narrow hotel bed that Old H. B., engaged in the titanic labor of removing his boots, reflected that thirty years took a lot of living. When the Little Man came out, he would probably have about five years or so of life, to judge from the look of him... Old H. B. begrudged even five years to the man who had hurt him, but he was beset by a growing uncertainty... And by a new thought, to him far more poignant than the Little Man's fate! *In being unsure he had lost his vengeance!* Its glow was, he realized with disgust past utterance, forever beyond his reach! Fear of losing it had driven him to risk imprisoning a possibly innocent man... Now he could never have it because he could never be sure that the man with the axe was not still taking his pleasure up and down the land... *And even if by any miracle he should ever meet and know him, he had sealed his own lips!* Also the first doubt recurred, less important but persistent. Suppose the Little Man should never have done anything except think about the notes... and yet have lost all but five years or so of life?

Old H. B. sat up sweating wetly. Half-formed projects of making a clean breast of his whole uncertainties, and 'clearing out for good,' ran through his mind... But then that meant the abandonment of his dream... And again suppose that the man were

guilty, as all evidence pointed that he was? What then? In order that he might not be punished, he, H. B., would have given up all the world he knew, the hope of his life... *For the sake of the man who — innocent or guilty — had robbed him of his vengeance?* Absurd! He rolled heavily back onto the bed.

To Old H. B. in the next days men said, 'Where you goin'?' and he replied, 'T' make two thousan' more — poun's, me boy! I 'aven't enough capital!' When asked, 'What fer?' he said, 'Fer what I wants!'

Later he collected his droving plant and rode North.

Outside the little iron lockup a fat old dog seated himself with occasionally bumping tail and perfect confidence to wait — for thirty years — for the return of his god, but, on the morning when the prisoner was taken to the train, men inexplicably beat him away.

VIII

When Georgina was eight years old, her hair hung in a cropped mane to her small brown shoulders, waving as though it had just been freed from a braid (a quite deceptive semblance) and tossed in silken black tendrils and little featherings about her face. A face which was paler of cheek than it had been — save, that is, at those times when Donald the Shearer rode up to the Old Backs Homestead. As for such a wanderer, he quite often did; arriving with his saddle-bags bulged by miraculous red apples and candies in silver paper, and strange gay crackers the like of which no one else in all the West had even seen! Candies and crackers which thrilled every one from Mother Backs to the brown babies of Georgina's eldest sister!

Then one day Donald came with his spurs flashing and his blue eyes a-dance, and he kissed Mother Backs, so that she said: 'Aye, my love, my liddle one, my Donald! Th' best rider an' th' best axeman an' th' best man er them all!' (For Donald might or might not be adept, as he said, 'at the game o' livin',' but he could win the hearts of women!) And as Mother Backs hobbled about the great fireplace stirring the simmering kangaroo meat stews, her dark face turned always toward him, with a light that it had never held for her own sons!

That night, when the 'singings' were ended, he told them that he was going away with Black Dan to the Gulf Country, hunting gold... And that this good-bye would be a long one.

And in the morning he kissed all the women except Georgina (who flung aside). And then he wrung the sinful hand of Old Backs, who it has been explained before wore his sins with a certain endearing lightness even though they were red! And then Donald rode away on the same well-bred grey horse for whose dyeing and cleaning he had once been billed, leading Black Dan — who walked with the faintly dancing motion of a very old horse who still values his appearance and wants his owner to be proud of him!

Mother Backs went wailing into the house; tears rolled down the brown youthful cheeks of the sons and daughters of Old Backs. Even Old Backs turned with sudden and unmerited venom upon his youngest son, Budget — who had gone out to run up the stallion — and cried: 'Did you get him?'

Budget, weeping into his sleeve, shook his ragged head: 'He jumped th' wires!'

'I knew when I saw you go out that one of two things would occur!' shrieked Old Backs. 'Either you'd break your neck or drive him over the fence — now the worst has happened!'

Only Georgina did not express regret, but darted away through the sandalwoods to where, unseen, she could watch the grey and black horses and the rider pass! He went singing gaily: 'My home's a thousand miles away — in Never-Never-Land!'

When they were quite gone, Georgina walked out and stood for a long while in the middle of the road looking at the grey dust where the hoof-marks showed like strange flower patterns... Presently she knelt to see them a little more clearly.

That night she asked irrelevantly, 'How long does horses live?' And her brother Budget, whose tears

still welled at the thought of vanished apples and strange crackers that might come no more, replied rudely, 'Until they dies!'

In this same year of Georgina's eighth birthday, Old H. B. rode back from the toil of the drovers' roads, having made his extra two thousand pounds, and ready to inspect and take up Tharlane, the Plains of the Sun — where the red dingoes bred or fled before the lightning-kindled fires!

Following the route by which he had travelled when he was attacked three years before, he came at last to the Strathmores' Homestead, and decided to spend the night there, partly because, sensitiveness being omitted from his psychology, he rather enjoyed wresting entertainment from the unwilling Anthony; partly because he had heard that Anthony's barmaid wife had recently eloped (after Anthony had almost ruined the family trying to make home as congenial as the bar); and partly because he liked Sary, and enjoyed her history.... For Sary had once been married and very happy — for a week! Only then her husband 'went away' and they had discovered that he possessed a wife already. Sary had borne him a little son... whom Sary said was 'backward' and Anthony described as a 'judgment.'

Old H. B. was in the habit of saying, 'Now, if you wants t' see real bloody *Goodness*, look at Sary!' (Still he had never lost an opportunity of telling her small tragedy with hilarious embellishments!)

This evening, as she admitted him, he regarded her worn frame and plain, patient face with the leering joviality he reserved for all women, and said, 'Yer looks like a lily, Sary... or a rose!' To his surprise she

blushed to the roots of her short pale hair, and actually stammered before the wonder of a compliment. 'That's terrible perlite of you, H. B.!' said Sary gratefully. Then she called Anthony to help him put out his horse.

They went, Old H. B. rolling with ponderous geniality, his unwilling host steeped in depression.

''Ow are the sheep doing?' asked H. B.

'Poorly, very poorly,' said Anthony.

'Lots of water in the crick,' said H. B.

'Soon evaporates,' said Anthony.

''Ow did the new windmill work?' asked H. B.

'Only pumped once,' said Anthony; 'that was in the gale that blew it down.' After this, conversation flagged slightly.

On the way back to the house, Anthony said mournfully, but with a certain increase of friendliness, 'Brother Jerome is dying!'

Old H. B. expressed surprise and asked what hospital the sufferer was confined in.

'He's not in any hospital,' said Anthony sadly. 'That's the pity of it... The wagonette's broke down, you see! He — I refer to Jerome — is most unreasonable!' added his brother, suddenly growing confidential, 'most unreasonable — keeps wanting to hire a trap from Murgan!'

'Go h'on!' said H. B., with appropriate horror.

'I'd like to humour him,' said Anthony. 'But you can't do that sort of thing...'

'What's th' matter with 'im?' asked H. B.

'Paint,' said Anthony. 'Just pure paint. He was doing the meat-house roof and the paint soaked right through his system — whenever he gets hot, he sweats red oxide, and yesterday he vomited two pints.'

Old H. B. was a bushman and therefore accustomed to hearing of remarkable medical symptoms, and deeply interested in them. Sceptical in most things, he was yet quite ready to find the afflicted Jerome a veritable fountain of red oxide, and said eagerly, 'Can h'I see 'im a minute?'

Anthony regarded him, and then said doubtfully, but without glimmer of irony, 'It might cheer him up — he's very peculiar!'

Once within the house, the hand of the new Mrs. Strathmore became obvious, for although the Strathmores had always been known as 'too mean to give a dog a drink at their mirage,' Jerome lay in a brass and mirror-flashing splendour of bedstead, under a soiled pink satin eiderdown! The room was crowded with bamboo furniture, lace doilies, dying aspidistras, and gilt-framed photographs. In the middle of a cream-and-puce carpet stood Jerome's bath, full of dirty water from his yesterday's ablutions, and beside it in a sodden heap lay his working clothes. His wizened, prominent-toothed Strathmore face appeared above one of his sister-in law's lace-frilled bed-jackets.

At sight of his visitors, he groaned and turned to the wall.

'He's brighter than he was,' said Anthony.

H. B. said innocently, 'What's Jerome like when 'e's depressed or out o' sorts, as you might say?'

Anthony neither replied nor smiled.

The men in the West were in the habit of saying that Anthony Strathmore was mad, Jerome madder, and Ezric maddest!

Old H. B. felt that it would be a real loss if one of the collection succumbed.

On this point the supposedly dying man strove to reassure him. 'He wouldn't hire me a wagonette to die in!' said Jerome in a thin but wrathful whisper. 'Now I'll get better!'

The new Mrs. Strathmore being 'away,' the meal to which Sary presently called them was served in the kitchen on a table spread with newspapers. At the head sat the bereaved Anthony; at the foot his work-stooped, big-handed, furtive sister; and at one side sat Perkins, a venerable upholder of the Strathmores, famous alike for the length of his beard and the fact that he claimed to have bathed last in the spring of 'seventy-two when caught in a flood.

At Sary's left stood a vacant chair. She regarded it with weary, troubled eyes — apparently grieving over the absence of one of her unique household.

'Ezric be behavin' very strange, Anthony,' said Sary. 'He won't come in to meet Mr. Henrics nohow!'

Anthony made no comment — apparently feeling Ezric's conduct to be not unjustified.

'He's sittin' on the wood-heap with the goats,' said Sary gently.

'Perhaps,' said Anthony, 'he prefers them.'

'He seems,' continued Sary wonderingly, 'terrible nervy and *scairt* like!'

Anthony was not to be interested. In a depressed manner he inquired of Old H. B., 'Will you partake?'

Later, however, under the stimulus of rank tea, he brightened conversationally.

'This old cow as we are now eating,' said Anthony, 'has done well by us. Only last month I branded her tenth calf, and nothing would have induced me to take her life except that she'd begun to fail, as you

might say! It don't seem hardly right to eat a mother like she was!'

'Hush, Anthony,' said Sary, blushing painfully. 'That ain't a drawing-room subjec'.'

Anthony glared at her malevolently. 'No more aren't that!' he said, indicating a small sad-faced child sitting in the corner and banging an equally small tin plate which stood in need of replenishing.

Sary blushed more deeply still, and, giving the child some further slices of the maternal cow, hurried him out of the room.

Into the slightly strained silence fell the suddenly intelligible voice of Perkins: 'The best little chile Old Perkins ever set eye on! A bright fine chile, too good for the likes of any dishonest, crook-racin', barmaid-marryin', pale-faced contraption like some we see about disguised in a man's pants!'

Anthony ignored this, and the dinner proceeded quietly, save that at intervals Perkins continued to exclaim something about bright children, pale faces, or articles of clothing; his remarks becoming more incoherent as his anger cooled. Later, Sary and her aged knight washed the dishes while Anthony and Old H. B. retired to the drawing-room.

'Ever since my sister was afflicted,' said Anthony in a voice of weary and confidential explanation, 'and, as you might say, the Man in the Case departed, Old Perkins has took to that child as if it was his flesh and blood.' This peculiar error, both in taste and judgment on the part of Perkins, apparently depressed Anthony, for he sighed, and then said, 'Would you care to hear "There is only Mother" on the gramophone?'

In the room were many things — from a grand

piano to dingo-skins adorned with crimson felt scallops and glassy golden eyes; painted plaques, and lace chair-backs, staghorn brackets, and silk artificial roses — but its most individual note was struck by two enormous photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Strathmore in bridal costume. They gazed at each other from opposite walls and were generously over life-size and full length. They were also tinted. Mrs. Strathmore, with curled golden hair and wild blue eyes, was somewhat surprisingly descending a ladder from a rustic hayrick with a bunch of pink roses almost as big as small cabbage heads in one gloved hand, the other hand resting timorously upon the region of her heart. Her smile was at once rapturous and modest, her head turned slightly to one side in maidenly hesitance. Across the room Mr. Strathmore, in swallow-tailed coat, spats, and white camellia, bowed in humble adoration before his descending bride, while in one hand he held a bell-topper and in the other worshipfully extended the golden ring that was to make her his: he possessed a pink-and-whiteness of complexion truly girlish. His expression was a masterpiece.

Despite himself, Old H. B. was impressed. Anthony Strathmore followed the direction of the old man's gaze and looked from his wife's portrayed loveliness to his own picture.

'It don't do her credit, but it flatters me,' he said with a deprecatory cough.

'I reckon it's the spit of you,' said Old H. B. 'Best likeness I ever see!'

Anthony blushed as Sarah had done. 'Perhaps you would like to see some more I have?' he asked with masked eagerness. The album was produced.

'Half of it is photos of me,' explained the owner, 'and half of Mrs. Strathmore.'

'Let's see you first,' said Old H. B.

Anthony displayed the photographs with trembling fingers.

'They're *not* h'all you?' H. B. questioned incredulously. '*Not* h'all these ones in h'evening dress?'

'Yes!' cried Anthony. 'Yes! All me, me in different positions.'

Old H. B. put this by for retailment.

Before they had come to Mrs. Strathmore's portraits, Anthony was depressed and suggested that they go to bed.

The bedroom was also magnificent as to furnishings, but contained only a double bedstead.

'Perhaps,' said Anthony hesitantly, 'you would not mind going to bed with me?... Ah hem! Our accommodation is limited.'

They retired, but, owing to disparity of weight, it became obvious that the slight Anthony must sleep literally in Old H. B.'s arms. 'H'I will,' said the latter, ' 'old you like a water-lily on the stream.'

'I think it might be better,' suggested Anthony uncertainly, 'if you hove yourself elevated up while I put a chair or two under you!' This improvement effected, Anthony put out the light and groaned.

'Concerning matrimony,' said Anthony, expressing the wisdom of the ages, 'it's a very peculiar thing! Now, my sister Sary, as you might say, hasn't had sufficient, an' I'm' — he sniffed — 'worn out with a superfluity — matrimony is a very difficult accomplishment, Mr. Henrics!'

'N'I 'ope you don't mind snorin',' said Old H. B., suddenly feeling something of compassion for the

small man in his overfurnished, mortgaged, and wifeless house.

Anthony said that he did not mind snoring, except the sort that fizzled out on you, 'an' seemed expired'; he said that he had heard that Old H. B. possessed a full free snore; then he added wearily, with plaintive pathos of longing, overriding philosophy, and with complete disregard of possible inappropriateness of place and time, 'If only Mrs. Strathmore were here now!'

Next morning, before Old H. B. rode on in the dawn-grey, he caught a glimpse of Ezric's narrow face peeping circumspectly beneath the blind of his window — as little in the Strathmore household could surprise him, he dismissed the matter... And yet, in spite of this, a faint sense of something almost remembered clung to him, of something dimly sinister about a man whom he had regarded as a source of entertainment along with all other things of Strathmore.

That night he slept upon Tharlane: rolling its uneaten half-million acres, grey and silver beneath the stars. Tharlane, vast, beautiful; to his eyes defiant...

As the first light came, he saddled up again, and before the sun struck fire from the great dew-spangled cobwebs among the tall bone-coloured grass, he was on his way to explore a part of the runs' immensity, immensity which stirred him to the emotional depth of his being...

It had lain here wasting, wasting, for unnumbered years! Soil, and grass, and very air!

Through the low green-grey tangles of the mulga scrubs there were only the tracks of kangaroo and

wallaby and dingo... And yet they should be netted with the thousand red dust ribbons of the sheep pads, and in the sun-silence there should rise the blurred whispering baa of sheep; and through some wool-shed yet to be built there should flow every year the wool-wealth of them, a hundred thousand sheep — *his sheep!*

On the official map which had been carried in the old man's saddle-bag for over five years the land showed as a vast set square, its roots to the north and east, its two wings stretching away due west and south. The whole outlined area being over one thousand square miles of practically virgin earth-surface — the efforts of MacDowell and his predecessors having but touched its fringes!

In the Government particulars, also in the saddle-bag, it was classed as Third-Grade Land, and estimated to carry a sheep to eight acres — 'that meant a sheep to six acres; a hundred thousand sheep year in, year out, when it was fully improved,' calculated the old man with lightening eyes.... Also he believed that it might carry more than the official reckoning: there was a rich blur of blue grass on the flats, and mulga-mitchell grass in the scrubs, and belts of young mulga which held promise of security in any ordinary drought. There were long shallow water-courses gold with breast-high kangaroo grass, that would produce tender green picking if regularly burnt... And it had lain here unused, waiting in the swelter of sunlight!

In the beauty of a summer of plenty the voices of the untouched wilderness throbbed about him through the growing heat.

From the grass broke quail and bright finches and

rainbow-winged grasshoppers; kite hawks wheeled in the infinitely deep sky, every vibrantly stretched feather sharply visible; crested pigeons, flushed with iris, whirred before him, and from the laced tree shadows came the endless monotony of their plaintive, somnolent calling. Heavy bronze-wings hurtled away, and brown and cream 'china-men birds' quarrelled among the branches. Butterflies went upon their drunken flights, and brilliant sun-birds tilted and poised across the glades.

Miles away to the south he saw an eagle pause, and swing and fall, with seeming slowness, through the blue fathoms of air, and later another great bird passed overhead with set wings that yet bore him swiftly southward toward the spot where the first had dropped. Then he saw another and another and another glide and swing and drop soundlessly — to some hidden kill...

On the map there were marked but three permanent waters: a group of tiny native wells to the east among ironstone ridges, a natural waterhole in the Black Ant Creek — which had its source on the western wing of Tharlane — and a minute spring to the west, where he meant to spend the night. All of these were permanent waters, but too small to be of any commercial use. He wished the artesian basin more readily accessible; wished for a river frontage — but over all regrets his senses sang, of a most fair land, and rich, to which had come the man to conquer the richness and the fairness and defiance of it!

As Old H. B. rode out from the mulga belts into a rich expanse of currajong country, the day had climbed its blue stillness of noon and the currajongs stood motionless in the sun-flood. The old man rode

into the shade of one of the weeping-boughed trees, and reflected that they were the finest currajongs that he had ever seen... From his island of shadow he looked out across the silent, tranquil noon. Far away between the trees the heat-waves rose from the sandy ground, and swayed the rich-headed grasses, here standing golden-tall, now softly clouded close to the hot red sand in shimmering wine-purple, or bleached streaks of greyish-white. To the old man this shimmering intermingling beauty of the many-coloured grass was merely young kangaroo grass, good for cattle, and 'purple cross-grass' of no good at all; and yet, as he sat there at the heart of the blooming, shining bowl of summer, he felt that he had found his home.

... All the sand beneath him was hollowed and shaped by the sleeping-places of the old men kangaroos, the immense smooth roots of the trees in part exposed, and in the hollows lay the drifted rubbish of the wilderness; leaves sear and blanched by the heat; currajong pods like little peak-prowed boats; dried kangaroo chard; a deep-tinted feather and the severed wings of a butterfly, blue as minute fragments of the sky. But over all and in blown-drifts and little hills and scattered carpets lay the fallen currajong bells; small, deeply honied, creamy-green or faintly stained with rose, offering festival to the untold racing millions of little black ants. And as Old H. B. sat there, tiny bells fell and fell and fell, softly, ceaselessly, from the flower-massed trees — like the tangible full-cupped benediction of summer. They caught in the horses' manes and forelocks; collected even where the reins touched the animals' sweating necks, only to be dislodged as the horses moved their heads. The trees were vocal with the hum of bees...

Sweating under the still golden magic of the heat, with the insignificant flower bells falling all about him, Old H. B. felt, as did that Holy Man of whom he had never heard, that he had come to his appointed place, and that here he would build his house.

Immense, immobile, passive, and bronzed, he watched with thought-narrowed eyes the slow honied rain of currajong blossoms through the blue air.

Then dismounting recklessly, without aid of stump or ant-bed, he freed the horses, and drew from his breast the sweat-stained letter wherein the owners of Tharlane, namely, the Crown Colony of Queensland, offered him in grandiloquent phrase its rotten egg. He might have the thirty-six-year lease of the thousand square miles, the Government reserving right of reappraisement of rental at the end of every ten years, this rental increase not to exceed fifty per cent. At the end of the first twelve years the first selections for small settlers would be taken from him, namely, one hundred and fifty square miles. Still later, other selections of two hundred square miles would be resumed for the same purpose. At the end of the thirty-six years, he should have preferential right to retain, as his 'absolute property' for all time to come, the homestead and such an amount of land as the Government considered proper. From experience he knew that in a property the size of Tharlane this would not be less than a hundred thousand acres.

In any case it did not greatly concern him, as he anticipated being a part of his red-sanded earth long ere that. It was to master, to attain, that his soul burned.

He read on: In all cases of selection and at the final falling-in of the lease, he was to receive the value

of any improvements which he might have erected; the value to be determined by a Government appraiser, and against which determination, either party, squatter or selector, should have the right of appeal. The rent for the first ten years should be nominal, but in five years' time he must have the whole of Tharlane enclosed with rabbit netting. He calculated slowly....Reviewing his limited capital... Thinking of the risks of drought and fire, of theft and heat, of the oncreeping destructive armies of the prickly pear to the north — the cactus that every year ate up its unheeded thousands of acres of land, so that already there were small forests of its grey fleshy leaves, so dense that no one could ride or walk through them. In a vision Old H. B. seemed to see the pear spreading across runs where had once fed tens of thousands of sheep and cattle! He was 'dead scairt' of the pear!

He thought of the security that might now be his — if he did not try; of the pauper's grave that would be his if he failed, as all men had failed, to work Tharlane.

It would be a fight all the way — and yet a fight, a fight was what his soul cried and burnt for! A fight that would strain every tendon of enterprise, every ingenuity, every heavy, fat, hampered muscle, and draw upon each deep well of cunning.

A fight that few young men would 'tackle,' and so far as he knew no man as old as he had ever dreamed of 'tackling'!

Oh, he would wring better terms than those offered him from the Government, but it would still be a fight, desperate and bitter, between him and the gold and green and grey waste of flowers and grasses that

had sweltered and breathed in the sun, and mated with the sun, and answered his caresses with fierce, careless productivity; mastered and raped by and pregnant only to the sun and the rain.

He looked at it as such a man might look at the fair body of a woman; and yet hardly thus, for that is the desire of savagery of cruelty, and in Old H. B.'s eyes, where there had seldom shone nobility, there flamed now the light of savagery of courage that has ever hurled men against the forces stronger than themselves; that has sent them to die in unknown hollowness of frozen night; in the spume-walled indifference of the old sea; that ever calls up in them answer to the mere presence of strength, with the fierce strength of men. And, though they die ruptured and broken, still they have stood shoulder to shoulder with immensity, with that which is the enemy of life; stood for a moment as a man should stand with fierce lithe shoulders and back-curving spine and savage arms, before the cosmic cruelty broke them.

If he left Tharlane alone, he was sure of the peace of old age. If he tackled it, and failed, he was sure of the poorhouse. He would not begin again.

'H'all men must die,' said Old H. B., and he meant (although he had not been trained in the subtleties of thought until he knew the shadings of what he thought and meant) that all men are beaten at last as individuals by that with which they strive.... And that yet there is something of worth in that upright moment with the straining spine, heaving chest, and burning breath, when with the delight of all the battles of all the world they hurl themselves against the things which at last must pass over them — and may know only that they have shaped these

things a little with the impress of their straining, breaking body or keen mind... The doctor knowing that he himself must die, yet pushing back human death with all his strength: the farmer furrowing the earth of which he must be part at last.... Other than that hot hour in which men might share life a little there was no victory. *And yet the fight itself was worth all peace the world held: its winning, if he tasted his moment's, so-called, victory, would light him down to the dark triumphant!*

'H'I'll try yer, py God!' he cried, shaking heavy fist toward the western afternoon sky, pale with light, above the purple shimmer of the cross-grass: against both of which the currajong bells fell slowly from the laden trees — like drops of pale fire.

PART THREE

IX

So Old H. B. 'took up' Tharlane, and the joy of the earth-battle gripped him, and to all practical purposes he forgot the Little Man, imprisoned for the thirty years, 'which took a lot of living.'

The vast interminable gossip, which is the 'newspapers' of the outlands and the frontiers, commented upon H. B.'s madness in attempting to water lands that could not be watered, and to check fire where in wet seasons grass grew 'higher'n a man's head'; and when they learned that he planned to run sheep there, they were sorry for him...

Men also told each other, when they met for a moment on the long roads, or for an evening in the bars, that Georgina was 'growin' up,' as she was, with redder lips and longer lashes!... And men began to come to Old Backs' house to see the redness and the darkness of them!

Donald the Shearer was still away seeking the foot of the rainbow, and when one man said, 'We won't see Donald again, I guess!' Budget Backs somewhat unexpectedly hit him in the stomach — but Georgina said nothing...

On Tharlane work began: the slow forging of the fetters that were to bind the wilderness to the service of man.

For Old H. B. was redeeming his boast... He was working Tharlane — and by degrees the men who were in the bar-room on the night of the storm were coming to work for him!... Men of oddly different types, these, each playing his part — in the building

of a fence where fence had never been; in the road-making, and tank-sinking, the erection of wool-shed and pen.

There was Jamieson Rightsbourer, the well-sinker, shiftlessly dreamy, yet performing great feats of drilling with a ramshackle plant, and singing as he drilled the Song of the Artesian Water:

> 'Sinking down, deeper down,
> Oh, we'll sink it deeper down!
> As the drill is plugging downward at a thousand feet of level,
> If the Lord won't send us water, oh, we'll get it from the Devil.
> Oh, we'll get from the Devil deeper down . . .
> Sinking down, deeper down . . .
> Oh, we'll get it deeper down!'

Caressing his struggling drill on its many months' journey toward the scalding seas far below...

... Tank-sinkers, musterers, woodcutters — all the men whose lives and labours, and everyday or desperate adventures, and sudden often fearful deaths, made possible the working of an outland of the world. And men's conviction of Old H. B.'s madness grew, for he did nothing as other men had done it. In most of the water-courses of Tharlane, dams were useless because of the nature of the soil. He said, 'I'll make ring tanks on the clay flats an' fill 'em with wing drains'; and to do this he brought men with strange levels and instruments, who — so the bushmen said — 'tried to run water uphill by squintin' at it through a blanky tely-scope!'

But over all the work went on...

There were gleams of absurdity... Old Dinnervan, working alone at the fencing of what was to be the

No. 1 horse paddock, made friends with a large female iguana lizard, whom he christened Diana, and whose table manners were a delight to all who beheld them, and a matter of incredulity to all who did not. In response to old Dinnervan's gentle calling of 'Anna, Anna, Anna,' Diana would appear at a straddling run, and, halting just beyond the fire, poke her tongue in and out anticipatively. When thrown a bone, she ambled with it to a spiked mulga stump, which old Dinnervan called her 'sideboard,' selected the most appropriate of several convenient spikings, and, holding the chop-bone in her mouth, placed it against the end of the stick and then walked slowly forward. With the aid of this simple device she could perform, modestly and without ostentation, perfect prodigies of swallowing.

Old Dinnervan was very proud of her; she was, he said, 'A sweet winning creature,' but if he had guests he always added the caution, 'Now, don't be giving her anyt'ing bigger 'an a chop — just because she dat willing, and would try to push a boot down if you asked her, is no reason for splitting of her pretty culinary department.' One day he was very angry, for when he came home, so he said, he found her 'all trembling with the beads of perspiration on her gentle forehid,' after having spent the whole afternoon trying to swallow a sheep's jawbone which some heartless jester had given her. 'The ground was all tore up where she'd been trying for a foothold, me innocent lamb!' cried old Dinnervan narrating it.

... On the Great Copi Flats, where some day were to be the lambing paddocks, Big Harry South the tank-sinker was superintending his five horse teams as they hauled the biting ploughs through the white

clay of the old swamp floor... and after the ploughs the great scoops which piled the loosed earth into an ever-ascending bank, so that at last shaggy fetlocks sank from sight in the white dust as the horses surged up an angle of forty-five degrees with half a ton of earth and iron behind them. Great, gentle, enslaved fellows, the horses, toiling six and eight abreast, uncomplainingly, in the heat which set their hides a-dripping, trudging and straining through the dust that clogged delicate passages and membranes of nose and lung — while the men behind them fared hardly better.

The work on the Great Copi Tank had been considerably delayed by the absence or intractability of cooks, but this was not entirely the cooks' fault, as Big Harry, a just man, admitted.

'It's largely the men's doing,' he told Old H. B., when, for the fourth time, the tank-sinker had been obliged to undertake the cooking himself and thus withdraw his supervision from where it was most needed. 'They haven't enough to occupy their minds — when men's like that, nothing's sacred to them — not even cooks!'

The first cook had been an industrious little Italian, who had done some work in restaurants, but had never made bread. Wherefore the question of whether it would or would not 'wike' caused him much voluble concern. On the morning after he had set his first batch, the men had roused him in the grey dawn with the joyous news that they had 'never seen bread working so free.' Which was perhaps correct, as they had filled the bowl of dough with all the spare mice they could pick up about the camp, and these were weaving slow, eddying patterns as they swam.

It seemed a small thing, but it had upset the cook, who ran amuck and tried to kill Big Harry.

The next cook was Irish, and got along well until some one objected (on the ground that the labels gave them indigestion) to his throwing the whole condensed milk tins into the boiling water for the morning's porridge. This practice being a great saving of time — as, in contradistinction to the usual laborious method of opening and emptying and washing the tin, all it necessitated was the punching of a few holes in the lid and letting the water do the rest — the cook justifiably refused to abandon it, and left.

The next cook was very satisfactory as cooks go, but he had a dog which he was fond of saying that no deprivations or exigencies of life could part him from. One day, however, it bit him — being an overfat dog and of unsweet temper. Wherefore the cook precipitately sold it.

The men conspired amongst themselves, and, as each one returned to camp after the day's labours, he inquired for the missing dog.

'Where's Little Jimmy, cook?' asked the first man. 'What! You never sold him? Not Jimmy as could almost speak an' as was a better friend than any man to y', cook?'

'Yes,' said the cook good-temperedly. 'He didn't know when he was well off, he didn't, that dog — never had a hard word from me, an' that's his gratitude.' He held up a bandaged hand.

'What! You haven't sold Little Jimmy as would have died for you if you lifted your finger, an' wouldn't eat if he thought you was short, an' stood over you for five days in the blazin' sun growlin' to keep the ants away?' asked the fourth man.

'I have,' said the cook.

'But, cook, you *can't* have did a deed like that!' cried the tenth man. 'You'd have gone clothed in leaves rather 'an have parted with Little Jimmy. You *haven't* sold Little Jimmy?'

The cook said nothing, but there was something dangerous in his silence. When Big Harry came in, weary with his day's work, he said in all good faith (even as the men had hoped he would): 'What! You never sold Little Jimmy, cook.'

And the cook cast down his apron and leapt upon it and flung the boiled potatoes in one direction and the corned roast in another, and through foaming lips he screamed, 'You can have your damned infernal joke and another cook as well!'

The next cook was a very quiet man. He seldom opened his lips, until one night, that is, when the camp-fire discussion turned to the question of snakes: whether there were as many in the bush as there had been. Some said that there were not; others that there never had been many snakes in non-coastal Queensland. A flush brightened the cheek of the taciturn cook, for just as a careless hand may strike from an organ a master chord which will shatter a great window, so had they stirred the soul of the cook. He ventured a mild snake story. He said that where he had been camped as a youth, out from the Clover Lakes, there had been thousands of snakes.

If any one is ethically entitled to have their snakes in peace, it is surely a good quiet cook! But the men said that they did not believe him. That no son of Adam had ever, in one spot, even with such contributory causes as flood or fire, seen at one and the same time 'thousands of snakes.' The cook was an

amenable man. He said that, well, maybe there were hundreds — but there 'had looked more.' The men were shaken with derisive laughter. They declared that none of mortal flesh had at any time about a single camp beheld hundreds of snakes. The cook said that he felt certain he had seen a hundred as he went down to the lake edge one morning to get the water for breakfast. The men's very beings were stirred by incredulity. They said that no man who had not returned from a holiday to Bourke had ever seen a hundred snakes before breakfast. The cook rose suddenly to the full of his small stature, and in a trembling voice he cried: 'Well, there were fifty — I'll take my Bible oath.' And he added that he would fight any man in the camp before he came down another snake! He further stated that he was leaving in the morning. (Thereafter Big Harry explained to the men that he also would fight any man in that camp who cost him another cook. He was a powerful man, and so things went more smoothly.)

... And the great white basin of the tank began to take shape, so that Old H. B., looking at it in the twilight as he went his rounds, was already calculating how long the forty thousand cubic yards of water it would hold might be expected to last.

... New fence lines crept across the land; new roads formed themselves to feed the fences or carry water to the bores; men laboured mightily at the building of sheep and cattle yards; in addition to Big Harry's teams, six other 'horse plants' dragged plough and scoop in the slow piling of dam and tank.

The eagles, swinging high above the grey and amber of the summer world, could see now the

smokes of half a hundred camps rising in thin blue spirals to the great engulfing blue of heaven.

There were still limitless-seeming acres of untouched bushland, lying as it had lain from unguessed ages, its uneaten grasses awave, the sun-birds glinting across the glades. No little nibbling sheep had taken toll of its fodder wealth: its was still the gaiety of freedom — but the fetters were forging.

From beyond a grey belt of young mulga came all day long the sound of axes cutting rails for the marking-pens... From the heart of this wide box-tree flat there rose into the sun great vaporous clouds of white dust, and the clanking of chains and sound of whips, where the big horses, black and chestnut and white, showed momentarily through the dust-clouds as they plodded before the ploughs, round the dry cauldrons of the forming tanks.

And where there had been only bird-voices and the 'chitt'-ing of the kangaroo families, there were now the sounds of laughter and profanity, and the endless strangely stirring sounds of labour. There were interludes of risk; of absurdity; of tragedy. There was delay, and difficulty, and mistake. But over all the work went on. There was tragedy. But over all the work went on...

Three men, in search of work, set out on foot from Murgan for Tharlane Homestead. But they missed the turn-off and wandered along the Old Coach Road, waterless for forty miles... There the heat caught them, and their tongues swelled so that they could not speak. There, too, they met an Indian hawker driving his strange shambling caravan, met him when in their eyes he must have seemed an angel of the Lord. Gladness gave them strength, and, stumbling

with dust-blindness and dumbly speechless, they rushed toward him — and he thought them mad and drove away, and left them 'jumping and waving verri strange' until they fell in the dust!

When, two days later, he told of his experience to Old H. B., the men turned out from all the camps, tracking with lanterns and firebrands through the night. And one man they found that night, near where the hawker had left him... and he had died with his hat over his face. But the others had been stronger and less lucky, and had gone a long way, discarding their clothes as men dying of thirst will, and the crows had found them...

Young Fosset, the most ragged man and the gayest jester of the camps, stood with hands on hips telling of how Mother MacSpee's uncle had suffered for years with 'plumbago,' and when he died had left it in his will that he had to be 'desecated instead of being buried like a Christian,' when one of the railfellers suddenly cried 'Look out!' And Young Fosset stepped the wrong way, and was more broken when they took him from beneath the fallen tree than they had thought that one tree could break a man! It had seemed a pity, for his mother was a consumptive widow, and he had always gone so poorly clothed because he spent all his earnings in keeping her at a nursing-home in the hills a thousand miles away...

... And over absurdity and jest and tragedy, the work went on. Entangled in bottomless sand-drifts Jamieson caressed the ropes of his struggling drill and sang beneath his breath:

'Sinking down, deeper down,
Oh, we're going deeper down,

Though the shaft is always caving, and the tubes are always jamming,
Yet we'll fight our way to water while the stubborn drill is ramming —
While the stubborn drill is ramming deeper down.'

And then, nine months after he had started drilling, he struck the Great Basin at three thousand feet!

When Old H. B. went to see him, Jamieson was standing dreamily beneath his ramshackle derrick, steaming floods falling about him, steaming sand-tides ebbing round his feet, in his hands an old, old oyster shell, age-corroded, but still showing traces of its pearling — grown how many million years before? A shell which had seen the morning of the world — and having lain in darkness while man was born on earth and rose upon his two feet and built his first mud huts, and saw them eaten by the jungles, and built again in stone and marble, and at last in steel — was now flung to the light again...

X

And now, his roving being ended, Mrs. Henrics sought her husband's side. And the fact was recorded in Old H. B.'s diary for that year, where — apart from copious entries of the work on Tharlane — were to be read at different dates these notes: 'Me old galah Parrot come home'; 'Ezric Strathmore went off his nest — advised Anthony to have the poor fellow cared for proper'; and, 'Took up twenty thousand acres for Sary Strathmore.'

The more intimate story of these events is well told in the letters of the principal actors.

To her Aunt Clarice, Mrs. Henrics, wife of Old H. B., wrote on the —— of ——

'My very dear Aunt: I take up my pen to write hoping that this finds you as it leaves me at present in good health, praise God. His blessings are manifold!

'I arrived safely, and was met in Murgan by my dear husband. Who was looking very well though perhaps a little stout—his weight is now twenty-four stone four ounces. He was very glad to see me, although he is naturally reserved as are many strong types of men. He made a bluff little joke (about not having come to meet *me* but his new centrifugal pump) which I thought very amusing...

'I had worn my good brown dress, for I think that a woman owes it to her husband, herself, and her family, to look well; and my pink and blue hat and

mother's — we have only one mother and do not prize her until she is gone! — amber heart and gold bracelets! The dress I found had shrunk a little in being cleaned (dear H. B. accidently upset coffee on it the first day I wore it). Nothing that I could do would make it meet right up the back, so I had to wear my cream lace fishue reversed so that it fell down between my shoulders. I am *sure* no one *dreamed* that it wasn't meant to go that way!

'H. B. went away seeing to the pump, in case, doubtless, that the railway men handled it carelessly — although it *did* seem to me that it had come all the way from England safely! (Still I suppose one cannot be too careful with these valuable machines!) So I carried my luggage across to the hotel, for I did not happen to have the price of a tip about me and therefore did not care to engage a porter, but just said quietly, "No, thank you, there are some extremely fragile things in the valises." (They must of course be quite used to artists, photographers, and people of this sort who will not entrust their luggage to others!) Somehow at the hotel I became completely separated from H. B., and when it was, I thought, getting rather late for luncheon, I spoke to a large man with a beard standing on the verandah. I said, "Excuse me, but have you seen Mr. Henry B. Henrics about, please? I'm afraid he may be waiting for me to go to lunch." He said, taking off his hat politely, "I believe I did see him looking for you a while ago, ma'm, but I suppose he couldn't find you." (This shows how easy it is to miss people, for *I* had been looking for *him* too!) "He's having dinner now — can I take you in?" said my friend. So I thanked him and gave him my arm, and we went

into the dining-room which in some of the small hotels is also the bar, and where there were quite a lot of men standing and sitting about. H. B. was having his lunch at the centre table, and looked up as we approached. Suddenly he pointed in our direction with his fork, and said, in the irrelevant way he sometimes has, "Does any one want a old galah parrot?... Come! A old galah parrot for sale!" Some of the men leaning on the bar began to laugh, and I looked round to see where the parrot was (when they laughed more loudly still in the silly way men have)! H. B. exclaimed jokingly, although quite what it was about I was not sure, "Or a old curiosity shop?" All at once I was aware that it must have been the big man with the beard that H. B. referred to, for he had left my side and was crossing the room to my husband's table! He leant on it rather hard, upsetting the salad, and (being apparently sensitive to a joke) said in a very rude way: "That may be your idea of humour, H. B.! It's my idea of being a blankety, blankety, blankety blank!" (Of course I did not even understand the meaning of his coarse expressions, but *any one*, even a lady, could see that they were offensive!) Some of the men, who had not been laughing, shouted, "Well done, Drover Abel!" And others only laughed more! Altogether, it was such a dreadful scene that I decided that I did not want any lunch — although I *had* been rather hungry — and went back to my room, for, as you know, dear, mother always taught us not to associate with any sort of vulgarity!

'I suppose that I was really to blame for having spoken to, and then gone into a public room with, a strange man! But it was all very puzzling

and unpleasant and has made me feel rather conspicuous, so that I have told the maids that I have a headache and do not think that I will go down to dinner (unless dear H. B. insists on it, but I doubt if he does, as he has been very busy all the afternoon and I have not seen him). I think we may be going home to-morrow, but I have not liked to trouble him over the matter, as he is so averse to questioning.

'Your loving niece

'Bellephœbe Henrics'

To the Minister for Lands, Old H. B. wrote:

'Dear Sir: Ajoyning Tharlane to the north is a arear of some twenty thousand acres of prickly pear enfestide land. It is of so poor a carrying qwolity that it dont pay no man in his right mind — or any mind attal — to pay the rent or go in for the expense of watering, clearing, etcetery! In its present form it is, however, a menace to a vast strech of clean land both on Tharlane an Arteran's Land. As it is higher than these last menshuned propertys, every flud carries pear down across them, an in addition to this, two stock roots runs through it, an the pear seed is scatered by the traveling stock. My suggestion is that you declare it a sort of "buffer state," make it free of rent an taxes, an give it (with financial assistance) to anyone whose fool enough to work of it.

'Will you consider this sir?

'Very respectful yours

'H. B. Henrics'

The Minister for Lands replied:

'Dear Sir: We regard the plan for finance which you suggest as too revolutionary an innovation.

Surely the removal of the cacti presents no such great difficulties on this well-situated and desirable property? We will, however (in view of your describing the land as a menace to uninfected areas), make the country rent free for a period of ten years, *if, and solely on condition that it be cleared of pear in ten years.*

'I have the honor to be, sir,

'Your obedient servant

'.....

'*Minister for Lands*'

At about this time Old H. B. also received a letter from Anthony Strathmore, mentioning the departure of Sary.... Anthony feared that she would die of thirst, and also that he would have to get some one to do the cooking in her place! Nor was this the sum of his troubles, even as it certainly was not the letter's most interesting bit of news to Old H. B.

He had perused its domestic and monetary details with snorting amusement, but now his face was darkened — and he went back to the beginning to steady his thought...

'Dear Sir and Neighbour:' wrote Anthony. 'We are in a great many great troubles! I have done all that a man could do and more to avert the financial side of them! I have, in fact, mortgaged the property to three different firms, and am now involved in complications of a grave, a most grave, nature. For economical reasons I suggested that Perkins should be sent to a Home — in his own interests. I even arranged this, but my sister Sary took on unreasonably when she heard of it, and taking both Perkins and her boy Denny, went away on foot, carrying their things.

This is very serious, as they will probably die of thirst — and I fear that I must shortly employ a cook!' (There followed five pages of 'complications.') 'In addition to these wearing troubles,' wrote Anthony, 'there is another which overshadows them! You doubtless recall the Gum Waterhole on our creek? Well, Dear Sir and Neighbour, a year or more ago mysterious deaths amongst the sheep watering there began to occur, in a manner most distressing and puzzling. At first we were of opinion that they were caused by swagmen (whose sense of honesty is as you know regrettably low!) They were, however, too persistent! The sight of innocent woolly bodies being really painful to any one imbued with humanitarian sentiments and a sense of the value of sheep, at last I decided to proceed to the creek. I did so — but for the first two nights nothing occurred. My place of watching was in a large tree, as I felt that this was advisable (both from motives of discretion and for observational reasons). Although seemingly excellent from these standpoints, the tree was not a desirable resting-place, and before dawn came I found myself both gravely chilled and cramped by the protuberances of the branches. Also when maintaining a vigil of this sort there are, as you may have noticed, quite a surprising number of sounds to distract the human senses, and, if I may say so, fray the nerves! On the third night I had gone to my tree early (feeling that if I walked down the creek after dark, I might alarm the intruder), and shortly before the moon rose it seemed to me that I heard movements along the creek back under the eucalyptus trees! It was very dark and the moon seemed reluctant of her rising — but at last Diana's face

appeared above the horizon. As her silver rays illumined the tree-tops it occurred to me that I might not be as well concealed as might have been advisable for the purposes of my investigation. Although the leaves had seemed desirably thick before, I now felt that I was exposed to considerable light — while all below was in dense shade!

'*Then I heard laughter!* Or to be accurate (which should be the aim of all writers), *I heard giggling!* I found it hard to decide what to do, as to come down into the darkness was unpleasant, but so, also, was remaining aloft in the moonlight. I was still considering the matter when the moonbeams began to creep down upon the ground, in long strips as they do... For a while I could see nothing, then I observed a figure *capering* on the bank! Sometimes it bent itself and laughed, sometimes it made small runs and stops! *It carried a large and repulsive knife!* As I looked, it stiffened to stillness, and then, running on hands and knees, moved into the shelter of a log. Some sheep were coming in to water (as you know they will sometimes on moonlit nights). When they were closely approached, the figure ran amongst them with the knife! They were fine sheep, dear H. B. and Fellow Neighbour (worth at least five shillings)! I forgot my fears, descended from the tree with rapidity, and, racing upon the figure, fired my gun at it, but my aim was apparently imperfect as I killed four sheep and *it* fled up the creek! I commended my soul to the Maker of us all, and followed with the best speed I could muster. It is my impression that we ran for many leagues. (I was gaining, although my breath came with painful vigour.) We entered the ration paddock... The figure crossed

the clearing about the house! It crossed the yard! I endeavoured to shout a warning (but it was vain, as my throat was considerably parched). *To my horror it climbed through Brother Ezric's window!* I roused Jerome, and while he watched without, I made my way within, again commended myself, shouted and received no answer, broke open the door and entered with the gun! *There was no one there but Brother Ezric, in bed!!!*

'The surprise was almost painful. I shouted to him. He sat up, and then I saw that he was breathing with rapidity. And was wet with sweat... Oh, H. B., ours is an unfortunate family — both matrimonially and otherwise! *Ezric is mentally deluded!* He has believed for years, so we have learned, that the pool in the creek is a *sacred pool* — not merely as all God's gifts are sacred, but with a special sacredness! He has been killing the sheep lest they profane the waters, or sleep in holy places! They were sheep of great value, and we feel that he should be placed in custody (although he is still a useful man about the station, and we may have to employ a hired man to take his place). But, in addition to this important consideration, he threatens to drown himself in his sacred pool at the mere suggestion of an asylum — having apparently overheard us discussing it! We are, H. B., puzzled but respectful. Could you advise us?

'Sincerely respectful

'Anthony Strathmore

'P.S. He is quite pitiable, moved at the thought of being sent away, and is a wonderful man at fencing!'

The effect of this letter upon Old H. B. was described by Mrs. Henrics in another letter to her aunt,

also detailing certain difficulties of life with Old H. B. To her Aunt Clarice, Mrs. Henrics wrote:

'My dear Aunt: Trusting that this finds you as it leaves me only less flustrated than is your affectionate niece! Dear Aunt, things is not as pleasant as they could be in our home — may God shelter it! — H. B., my dear husband, is, as you knew before, because I have told you before, always absent-minded in some things (such as leaving the gate open so that the rabbits come in and eat my flowers, so that I see them hopping about everywhere!) but lately he has been rather irritable. I pray for patience and know that I made my bed and must lie in it, but this morning he threw the pepper at me and all the jackaroos at table. He threw it at me before all their eyes, I mean! And it has always seemed to me, as dear mother taught us, that a husband and wife's married life should be private, being a sacred thing... Perhaps I was in part to blame, but it seemed hard when I was only trying to make the talk bright and interesting at table. You see he got a letter by hand, and I noticed when I put it at his place that it was from Strathmores' Homestead, and I don't really approve of letters coming from a place where that woman is — it might make people talk — but I just said when he sat down, "Why, dear, there's a letter for you!" He said, "Did you think it was a poached egg?" (I know he means these things jokingly, but they are hard at times, Dear Aunt!)

'Just then Mr. Barwon the Teamster, who was at the table, said coarsely: "You was snoring a treat last night, H. B.!" I do not care for this sort of thing, so I said coldly: "I think you were mistaken, Mr.

Barwon — I know, of course, that Mr. Henrics breathes heavily at times... *he does not snore!*" H. B. looked up and said, "Well, I wouldn't have mentioned it meself — but that was me better-half, me little lump of cuddle, as you heard." I confess I was mortified, and it was *so* uncalled for!

'H. B. began to read the letter and I went on pouring out the tea and chatting as gaily as I could to the jackaroos, particularly to young Maurice, (who is so polite and sometimes opens the door for me like you read of in books!) Presently I said: "Well, Mr. Henrics, you might tell us what it's about, or I'll be getting jealous and thinking something!" (For I think that people are less likely to think anything if one jokes brightly about it!) *Then I saw his face!* I was really quite shocked, for, as you know, he is always a ruddy complexioned man and rather swarthy, but this time he was purple, Dear Aunt! He was looking at the letter and said, "By God! So that's who it were." I ran to his side and said, "Calm yourself, my dear!" He got to his feet and said, still looking at the letter, "You poor old fool!" (This time I am really convinced he did not refer to me, Dear Aunt!) I said, "Tell me everything — I'm your wife." Then he seemed to see me. He said, "Shoo," and flapped at me with the letter! I went to support him. It was then he threw the pepper-pot at me, which was very inconsiderate, as he knows I suffer at times from hay fever as it is! Then he said: "Well — it'll teach him to be where he had no business to have been after what he had no right to!" And then he laughed a terrible laugh, and walked out of the room. Dear Aunt, what *could* have been in that letter? (I have looked for it everywhere,

but a lot of his things he keeps locked.) I am in a dreadful state of suspense, but still hope to find the key.

'Your loving niece
'BELLEPHŒBE HENRICS

'P.S. He has been muttering "Poor old fool!" twice to-day when I came into the room, and once he said: "Thirty years is pretty long."'

For Old H. B. had learnt at last, what he had long half-suspected, that the Little Man spoke truth at his trial... That a man guilty only of an attempt at petty theft had gone to prison for the thirty years which took a lot of living — gone there for a crime he did not commit.

Old H. B. had little of that goodness which he laughed at in Sary, yet he said, 'H'I'd like to er let 'im h'out, surely as 'ell h'I would!' Then added, 'But what would that do to me darlin'? What would she do without me?' (Referring in this speculation to Tharlane, and not the home-come 'old galah parrot'!)

... To free the Little Man meant to confess false swearing, and that meant arrest, or colossal damages, or both! And in either case, harm to Tharlane — the ruin of the dream! So at last he shrugged and began a letter to Anthony, saying:

'About the first part of your letter I cannot do nothing. About the second — its your plain *dooty* to have poor Ezric placed under restrant! I'm told as lunatics is *terrible* fond of murdering their *near relatives!* Your lucky to be here to do it and don't let a day go by without doing your dooty! Don't take

no notice of what he says, but be cereful the poor fellow don't do himself no mischief, or it would always be on your conscience!' (For the surprising knowledge had come to him that being 'cared for' may hold all needed punishment for a man! He was sorry that he had not thought of it before, but glad that he had learned it now — as his resentment against his assailant was as keen as when his wounds were healing!

... Ezric had once dared to cross the march of his ambition with crazed steps! — Ezric should suffer and not even find the escape of death if he — Old H. B. — could help it!

Then he had an inspiration, which brushed Ezric, who had attacked him, and the Little Man, whom men believed to have attacked him, alike from his consciousness.

Why not put Sary to work at the prickly pear-infested land that was always a menace to Tharlane on the north? If any one could be induced to accept the Government's enslaving terms, it was surely Sary? Why not 'take it up' for her?

She had worked all her life like a slave; if any one could handle the pear, it was a patient 'work horse' like her! It would cost him but little to finance it for her and put on the necessary water, and it would save many hundreds, perhaps thousands, in wages to pear clearers...! He continued his letter.

'On thinking it over I will try to pervide for poor Sary. I'll start her on the selection to the North of here! It's a real fine block an she'll have the pear out in next to no time!'

Could she ever make anything at all from it? He did not think so, but just in case she did, he added:

'She can pay me back real *easy!* (Of course I'll have to charge her a bit a interest.)

'Your very sympathetic friend

'H. B. Henrics'

It was the best bit of business he had done for a long time — and Sary regarded him with humble gratitude of adoration, and, swamped with debt, burdened by Denny and Perkins, was very happy on her selection!

XI

'Goodness — just goodness,' said Old H. B. once. 'That's what's the matter with poor Sary!'

'I can,' said Mrs. Henrics piously, 'well imagine worse things than goodness, H. B.'

'Well,' he said, 'I suppose a wife might be one — an' Sary aren't got that; but still, if yer wants something to keep yer poor, an' sweat yer worse a'n Gulf Fever, why, just try goodness!'

Nor would an observer have thought Sary's day joyful on a typical morning in mid-summer. She got out of bed very quickly at the first shock of the clock's alarm — for if she did not get up then, she sometimes went to sleep again. Attending to her meagre toilet, she was pleasantly glad of the fact that it was summer. Summer mornings were very good according to her simple code, though quite what there was in her life to inspire happiness, in either summer or winter, was hard to say. She had no pleasures as these things are understood by the mass of humanity, no companionship save that of her dumb half-witted boy, and the now childish and cantankerous Perkins. She ran both her house and the selection practically without assistance, and continually pitted her woman's body and will against tasks cruelly heavy for them, and she was usually what she herself described as 'spikulous' with cactus thorns got in clearing the prickly pear. She was patient, happy, and almost unbelievably brave, with a modicum of encouragement that would have been insufficient to carry the average optimist through a single day.

Always instinctively clean, and for long years thwarted in her desire for cleanliness by the infinite dirt and disorder of the Strathmore family, she now organized her life with methodical exactness. By the veering candlelight she plentifully scoured her chafed face with yellow soap, not omitting the creases of her ears; scrubbed her big reddened hands with half a floor-brush, hastily pulled back her thin, greying hair, and put on her much-patched garments with the hooks of which she always bungled, being more deft in the wielding of a crowbar.

She liked her clothes, would have liked time 'to look after them a bit'; and so to have had, when Old H. B. paid her compliments, the shy happiness of believing them true. ('By and by' she meant to dress 'real well.')

Her toilet completed, she peeped under the blind, realized that she was late because she could see the white line of coming day, and began to run about the tidying of the rooms. It was, she knew, one of the evils of living to please yourself, 'so you might say,' as she did, that you grew lazy and stay-abed if you weren't careful.

Presently she went, bearing her candle, into the kitchen living-room. Coming into this room always gave her sharp happiness even when she trembled with the frost. To her mind it was a very lovely room, and it was literally of her own building. A patient and laborious task of many weeks. She had felled and split the bloodwood slabs herself — almost a year ago. And, after they were hauled, placed and nailed them with what little assistance she could wheedle from Denny and Perkins by bribes of promised sweetmeats. She had wrenched her shoulder lifting at the

heavy end of the big centre joist... But now the room was completed and furnished, and it was a charming room; charming as are all loved rooms.

The tone of the unpainted slabs was rich red, the floor thickly sanded a brighter shade of red; black-and-white check curtains hung at the windows, and the unpainted deal tables and the chair seats were covered with black-and-white check linoleum. The oddly assorted tins holding tea and coffee and sugar on the pine shelves were painted bright blue. Sary had seen a picture of a kitchen so treated in an old copy of a woman's magazine published in far Philadelphia which some one had forgotten and left in the train. (She had waited a long time to see if they would come back for it, and when no one had done so, she put it into her bag with hands that shook a little.) In it there had been the black-and-white and blue kitchen, and in the kitchen there had been a woman with golden hair, a pink apron, and a ruby smile, standing at the table in a graceful attitude. Sary had admired all the pictures and read all the stories in that magazine many times, but always she came back to the delectable kitchen! For kitchens were of her world and she understood them, while most of the rest was mere fairy-stuff; lovely, but unsatisfying.

The advertisement said: '*Why* have a dingy uninteresting kitchen when the scene illustrated above can be carried out so cheaply and easily at home by using Sunbeam Varnish and Enamel?' Sary's mind had travelled slowly from desire to determination. At first she had said that that was, of course, 'all right in Americky,' or that it was no use 'a old work horse' like her wanting it. But she kept on wanting it — and now it was hers! (And sometimes in her rare moments

of idleness it might have been noticed that she stood in something of the position of the lovely lady in the advertisement and smiled at the door through which — in the advertisement — the handsome youth with the adoring eyes was coming. Although, of course, she knew that was mere foolishness!)

Sary could have spent any amount of time looking at her kitchen — but this morning, she dared not pause for more than a glance.

First there was the fire-box of the stove to clean, and the water to carry from the dam two hundred yards away. When she was 'real rich,' she would have a water tank and 'a genu*ine* tap,' thought Sary, toiling cheerfully back up the dam-bank and along the path...

While the chops were grilling and the water boiling, she set the table, and then went into 'the boys' room' to call her family.

She called them regularly, but the results varied. Sometimes they got up and sometimes they did not. Denny was at least spritely if undependable, but even Sary admitted that Perkins was becoming 'slowing at times an' a bit wearyfull of mornings.'

In response to her shaking, Denny lowered his long thin legs over the bed edge, produced from his pyjamas a young opossum, two brilliant-studded shoe buckles, and a mouth organ; and after settling the 'possum comfortably in the hollow which he had just vacated, and hiding the brilliant buckles under the pillow, he applied the mouth organ to his lips and played very shrilly and with great spirit:

'Oh, she was such a beauty,
That I thought it was me duty,
And I never went and asked the reason why...'

Sary, being used to these musical interludes, turned her attention to Perkins, asleep in the bunk across the room. The old man slept with his head well back, forehead thunderous, and eyebrows elevated, all of which, combined with his prodigious length of beard, gave him a certain baleful dignity.

'Perkins!' shouted Sary. '*Perkins!* PERKINS!!!'

Perkins bounded violently, sat upright and opened one eye; said something that was unintelligible, but obviously derogatory of Sary, and went to sleep again. From the kitchen came the smell of burning chops, and Sary ran back to them.

> 'Oh, she was such a dear,
> That I seen me duty clear,
> An' I'd kissed her, though I'd knowed I had to die,'

tootled Denny, taking 'A' in alt.

Sary turned the chops, made the tea, put the porridge on the table, and, returning to the bedroom, shouted earnestly and repeatedly into Perkins' ancient ear that breakfast waited. After much faint rumbling from his beard and mild convulsions, he suddenly asked how he (or any other man for that matter) was to get dressed with her in the room pulling his whiskers, hanging on his neck, and 'fooling round' him?

Sary did not wait to deny these charges, but, considering the signs of his rising as favourable, interrupted her son in the midst of playing

> 'Say you won't go to the ball, love,
> Stay with our child to-night!'

And, leading him to the table, helped him to his porridge, poured hot water on it and then golden syrup;

also deprived him of the mouth organ just as he had reached the climax of the piece, when

'There on the bed, Baby lay dead!'

Denny looked after it longingly, for to him it was the all of self-expression and of Romance and Beauty that the world held — apart, that was, from his 'possums. He half-rose, his dumb mouth working pitifully, but Sary shook her head and put his spoon into his hand, when his face cleared and he began his meal. It was as Sary often said gratefully — 'a real blessing' that he could feed himself.

When they had finished their porridge and begun to eat the chops, Perkins appeared, hobbling wrathfully and erratically with the aid of his ringed-gidgee stick.

When Sary sought to assist him, he delivered a wrathful poke at her insteps with this weapon. She avoided it quietly; removed the stick, and then deftly lowered the old man into his chair. Whereat his eyes filled suddenly with tears, and he broke into a treble wail of protest about being treated like a baby.

... She tucked a tea-towel about his scraggy neck, arranged his porridge (which he promptly pushed away, being at the same time, she noticed, careful not quite to upset it).

'A man wouldn't take a spoon of it now!' cried Perkins. 'Off my feed I be, now!'

Sary said in a voice of even, unconscious patience: 'You know now that last time you wouldn't let me help you, you set on the floor a dreadful nether-smite! Now *don't* throw off your neckcloth; that's your last clean shirt till I wash to-morrow after the lambs is

done... And *every one* has to be looked after when they're ill!'

The meal completed, she stacked the dishes tidily in the sink, considered trying to induce Perkins to wash them, and decided that it was less trouble to do them herself after she came home. Swiftly she made the two extra beds (taking all good care of the 'possum), swept the rooms, scattered corn for her few white leghorn fowls, saw to the family of chickens in the coop, and then changed hurriedly into her old men's overalls.

Time was very precious to her and she would have saved time had she put them on when first she dressed, but wearing women's clothes at least for a part of the day meant to her the retention of the finer niceties of life.

When everything was finished, she shook Perkins, now dozing by the fire, and pointing at the clock indicated the figure three on its dial and the corned beef in the pot. 'Keep the fire in and have the water in the kettle boiling, and pour it over the beef, and then put the pot over the fire... *At three o'clock!* Are you listening, Perkins? *At three o'clock.*' Perkins said into his beard that he was listening, but that as to what he'd do — that was his affair! He also mentioned that Australia was a country where you didn't work a man for nothing, and that he (Perkins) had 'a mind to go droving,' and that that would bring her (Sary) to her bearings. She disliked frightening him, but time pressed.

'If you don't keep the fire and put the beef on, I'll have to send you to The Home,' she said.

There had been times when even this threat failed, but on the present occasion it succeeded, and, mutter-

ing that there was nothing that he or any other reasonable man could see to make a fuss about, he became at least faintly civil.

'There's the chickens to feed at twelve, and at five,' she added (knowing that this he would do, because he loved the chickens), and then, summing up the morale of her opponent and deciding that the day was hers, she said, 'There's lots of water in the bedroom jug; when your rheumatics goes off you're to wash your face and hands.'

At last she set out, calling Denny with her, because if he was left at home he sometimes got into mischief. Once he had tried to fire the house, and the disaster had been averted with a narrowness that still checked her heart when she thought of it.

Although many years were to pass before the full menace of the 'green flies' was to be appreciated in the West, they were bad that year in a small sector about Murgan; breeding by the thousand in every rotten carcass or putrefying bed of vegetation. Or, striking the living sheep wherever the wool was soiled and rank, they left egg patches which hatched in a few hours, the maggots then working their way from the wool into the flesh.

... Waiting in the yards over beyond the dam were fifty rams and wethers which had been flyblown, and needed shearing round the belly and thighs—'crutching' as it was called.

For the main shearing Sary had to employ two men, and again at lamb-marking time. The actual manhandling of her sheep was the one form of selection work that she dreaded, but she had spent a lot of money that year, nearly twenty pounds on the iron and things for the house alone! And she must save in

order to pay back Old H. B. for his unbelievable kindness... And it was no use even thinking that it was waste of time for her to struggle slowly and laboriously with the crutching, or that there was other work she ought to be at, or that it would take her ten times as long as it would a man — because there was no 'spare money' left to pay a man, and the sheep had to be done.

An unconsciously pathetic round-shouldered figure, she hurried along through the already fierce heat with Denny tootling vacuously at her heels and her little black sheep dog bringing up the rear.

It was a pity, Sary sometimes thought, that it was so hard for a woman to do the things that a man did easily! Not that she felt any bitterness over her lot; she merely regretted being inferior. It was her simple ambition 'to do as well as a man' in as many things as she could.

By noon, trembling so that she could scarcely stand and with strange knife-pains running up her back, she caught her nineteenth ram, a big vigorous long-horned fellow almost too strong for her.

She straddled him and guided him between her legs into the shade of a little stifling bough shelter, then, holding him with her feet like a professional shearer, began patiently, desperately, to cut away the putrid maggot-riddled wool about the groin and thighs.

Every sheep meant for her a contest of strength; her knuckles had been broken against the pen rails, her arms were scratched and pierced with grass seeds, and yet she handled gently each obstinate, woolly fool, and as she came to those places where the flesh was deeply eaten away, she clicked her tongue in pity, her own agony of fatigue forgotten.

When lunch-time came, she lay down in a scanty shade with her worn face against the dust.

And suddenly she felt that she could not go on, that she must plunge deeply into the cool darkness of the dam! That she must sleep... But she could not do either, and slow sobs shook her — the protest of violated womanhood.

'Oh, why *aren't* I a man!' wept Sary.

Presently she put the billy on, and, spreading the damper and cold goat mutton on a newspaper, slowly forced herself to swallow the food she was too tired to taste; because if you do not eat you cannot work — even like a woman.

It was dark before the little black dog took the sheep down to the water and then out onto the Turkey Rise, and Sary sighed because it had all taken her so much longer than it should have. Then she tramped home to get the dinner and wash the dishes and set the bread. As she came to the house, sounds of splashing greeted her from the bedroom, telling that Perkins had postponed the horror of ablution as long as possible.... Still he had put on the corned beef and she was very grateful.

That night she was so tired that she lay down in her clothes on the floor, being afraid that she would make the bed dirty if she got into it before she undressed — and then not wanting to bother undressing and staying where she was.

But her momentary resentment had passed and she was happy again. Her breakdown of the day had been mere 'silliness.'

She was nearly always very happy, for she lived much in the future, when she would have 'a real floor'

in the black-and-white kitchen, the rainwater tank at the door and a little windmill on the dam, and when she could perhaps keep a hired boy. (For although she sometimes looked at the door through which in the advertisement came the adoring young man, she knew that such things were not really for her, and would have wanted nothing more, if, in addition to the windmill, etc., she had owned 'a real copper' and two or three good cows!)

As she slept, she smiled, being confident that these things were to come; also that time when she could get Perkins and Denny 'real clean on Sunday,' and they might perhaps take their dinner down beside the dam when it got cool.

... A determined knocking roused her. Opening the door she saw the handsome, smiling face of young Arteran — 'Gentleman Arteran' as he was termed because of his unfamiliar speech and easy grace.

He had been knocking with his whip, and now he flourished his hat and leaned from the saddle — but Sary saw that the hoofs of his restless horse were cutting up her path: because young Arteran had not chosen to walk from the gate!

'I have found,' said he, 'that the longest way round is the shortest to a pretty girl... I've tried the shortest, so I know!'

'You are lost?' said Sary.

He flashed white teeth at her. 'I'm on my way to The Block...'

Sary said slowly: 'Old Backs has fine horses.'

'The best in the land, I'm told — and a daughter called Georgina — or so I have heard!' said he, still smiling.

Sary looked at his heavy spurs: 'You would get

there anyhow!' she said. 'Go right ahead till you hits Tharlane boundary — then follow west...'

He laughed at the thrust, and, turning, rode into the perfect night...

PART FOUR

XII

Before Sary could afford the time for one dam-side picnic — with growing heat, scorching out plans and hopes of men — the Great Drought shut down on the land... Heat and light! Heat and light... A universe consumed by light and heat!

... The next year and the next, the next and still the next, passed, strained with drought, and very silent, each summer falling with added blight of heat on a shrivelled world, where the very stirring of life was hushed under the glittering pestilence.

After five years men said, 'Well, it can't be no wus!'

On Tharlane, Old H. B. had seen the whole progress of the drought... Had seen the grasses bleach to metallic silver and dull russets as they withered standing; had seen the russets become a dirty greyish-white, and later the whitened stalks break and crumble into fine dry dust...

The horses had died first, and then the cattle, and then the kangaroos and emus. Their carcasses had swelled and rotted; then the skins had dried to parchment over the bones, and in time desiccated to the impalpable dryness of dust. And the skeletons had lain there, for perhaps a year or so, in their completeness, and then the bones had fallen apart and been scattered, God knew how! For there was no living thing to trouble them; the carrion-eaters having long since grown weary of plucking at withered skin and dry bone, and moved away to the south — from a land where the feast of death was ended... And over the bones the dust had drifted and they dry-rotted

under the sun... The remains of the grass atrophied beneath its daily baking; and the breath of the drought wind, and the red whirligigs plucked at its pale dry hair, so that it crumbled and became grey root tussocks and broken whisps — and vanished. The young box trees had been the first of the trees to die, their round flashing leaves had lost their lustre, and turned yellow, then putty colour, then to the universal dirty white; and then one by one the leaves had fallen from the dead branches and formed little pale drifts about the trunks.

Even the mulga shed its little tough sweet leaves and stood almost naked under the waste of blue sky above the great corresponding waste of red dust...

It seemed to Old H. B. that a century had passed since he had heard a single bird note or the calling of an insect!

Such men as still travelled the roads travelled them afoot, for even the saddle-horses had gone. And when Old H. B. rode into Murgan on the old horse for which he bought fodder at famine prices, people came to look at it... An old horse who was not fed for love, but because, when a man weighs twenty-six stone, much walking is almost an impossibility to him.

The currajongs about the Tharlane Homestead sickened and lost their green, and in the parched springs no flowers fell from them to make honied rain.

Old H. B. saw, with a wrath that passed utterance, with all the agony of impotence, his fine fences weathering uselessly, the machinery of his pumping plants becoming old-fashioned without ever having lifted a gallon of water, his earth tanks, small and large, silting with dead leaves and blown clay powder, and on

the whole thousand miles of his domain not the hoof-print of a single sheep! Also he saw what was to him the most precious of all things slipping from him — saw the loss of Time. Saw the sterile years, barren, aye, more barren than those 'which the locust hath eaten,' pass in unmarked heat-beaten succession of waiting: creative man and pregnant earth frustrate alike for the lack of rain. Waiting? It seemed to the old buccaneer of the soil that he had waited past all possibilities of waiting...

At first men had said, 'If it doesn't rain in the spring,' or 'the summer,' or 'the autumn, I'll chuck it.' Then, 'If it doesn't rain next year...' and still they had waited. He had waited most stubbornly almost of all ... and, years past, had seen the last of his capital swallowed, and then for years watched the rising uncheckable tide of debt... And felt bitter past bearing to him the dictation of his mortgagees! He knew that the only reason these gentlemen had for not turning him out was that they did not expect to get any one else to manage as cheaply or efficiently for them, and because in the past Tharlane had proved so dubious a possession that they did not want it back on their hands... And yet he had to account to them for 'every bloody blooming penny' that he spent!... Spent more wisely than any other man in the land knew how to spend it! At thought of which red rage always thickened his blunt features to evil.

At times he was even moved to heavy satire.

His financiers had requested that they 'be consulted before any and all expenditures be indulged in.' And when a sportive red whirlwind destroyed certain outbuildings, Old H. B. telegraphed to the grave and infinitely dignified general manager of his monetary

advisers: 'Miniature cyclone destroyed lavatory stop may I replace?'

His dictators also requested to be informed at once of 'any increase or loss of stock,' which request rankled in Old H. B.'s bosom as he looked out over the motionless waste. Nevertheless, he wrote them that he would not fail to carry out their 'respected wishes to the letter,' and thereafter kept them fully posted by wire of the progress of his ''erds.'

'Glad to report Langshang hen has had triplets but against this must be set the death of Langshang rooster who succumbed in yesterday's heat wave.'

'Expect hundred per cent kids from blue nanny goat by black-eared billy.'

'Mustered five dead codfish in the Black Ant Creek paddock Monday.'

But wit was slight solace for the stagnant years...

Men suffered with a sickness of light...

Heat and light! Light and heat!

Brushing aside all plans and hopes of man...

Like a dark flower of this silent world, Georgina grew always more lovely — so that men said she was 'an eye-full!'

For Georgina possessed the vivid and burning beauty that once in a thousand times may spring from a mating of sharply opposed races — a beauty that is like none other in the world. A thing of sombre gold and dark rose.

Heat and light... Unbearable light and heat!

The drought years passed in immensity of stillness. For years men had not heard the note of a bird song or the tramp of a horse or the gay fluttering of a young

leaf. There was no flowered rotation of life to mark the changing seasons: no seasons came save summer heat and winter cold. Even winter was robbed of its frosts, for there was no moisture to freeze...

Only the splendours of light redoubled themselves or waned, playing with vast fearful brilliances across the dead earth. Men grew to hate the sun, and to shrink even from the nights of moonlight, wanting the secret covering of darkness, and dreaming of the grey veils of rain even in their sleep: restless and nerve-tortured by dryness and light — almost afraid upon the naked world of the white blazing armies of the stars!

Georgina was thirteen, and fourteen, and at last seventeen, and still it was drought time, and still Donald the Shearer was away in the North, looking for the foot of the rainbow — even though it was a long time since men had told each other that Black Dan, 'the greatest horse in the world,' was dead!

On the night of Georgina's seventeenth birthday, blue moonlight lay over the Old Backs Homestead, but from the doors and windows poured the orange floods of lamp and fire flame. On the rippled dust about the doors the commingling of lights gave a strange etherealization to the soft-ridged earth. Where the lamplight struck, the dust waves were warm gold or muted rose, but where the shadow should have lain, it was swallowed by the blue-white fire of winter moon, and showed blue against the rose-gold contrasts, so that the earth seemed transparent, ghostly...

Away across the flat the lines of the dead trees were dark blue and silver.

Within the house by the great fireplace, where the box logs burned to gold and fierce white and dusky pink, sat old Mother Backs, her grizzled black wool curling and tossing, her old pipe caught at the corner of her toothless smile: rocking and swaying and bending to the strains of her own concertina.

Under her withered hands the old rickety instrument became the soul of youth crying in the blue night, dancing in the hot rooms painted by the reeling firelight. Her withered dark face and old worn body seemed almost to pour forth the wild sounds from themselves, through their own ardour. She tossed the concertina aloft and there shook free the dancing torrent of the steps of eternal youth, hastening to the fulfilment of love!

She bent until the instrument was at a level with her feet, and the old secrets of the shadows that lips breathe upon lips quivered through the notes. She gathered it against her withered body and played into it the impassioned selfless barbaric love that she had all her life given to Old Backs... The thirty or so dancers in room and verandah, dancing now in the white, cold moonlight, now in the writhing, dancing passion of firelight, became tools swayed and shaken by the old half-caste woman at the fire. She played into her music her own life; the rush of horses' hoofs down a mountain where no tracks were — the flight of a yellow girl, with the police hard behind...! The water lifted before them as they took the river at the mountain foot... and then the breathless climbing of the farther hill, and the laughter as the bullets fell wide about her!... Then down again towards the sea — and never a trooper had seen her go! Laughing to herself, she made the dancers dance to

the white and awful wonder of the moon on the plains of the Territory, where the bleached, featureless, blind plain lay out to the sky and melted into it with the mist that was only distance... She made her music sing of the night's old fierce all-giving love that asked nothing, that knew no heaven, beyond being the instrument of joy to the beloved... She played of the primal, gaily born urge of childbirth as natural as the upspringing of the grass, as the pregnancy of the great plains to the sun. And as she played, she watched the young faces before her and cackled at her power as she saw them swoon, with half-closed eyes, or eyes strained to drink the soul from other eyes, while lips parted and breath came quickly.

Of all who played at the dances of the Old West, no one played 'like Mother Backs,' so the shearers said, and the drovers, and the wandering youth which came and went through her low-roofed house. They added, seeking to express what they had no words for, that it weren't 'just the tunes' she played.

'Dance, children, dance!' cried Mother Backs, rocking to the earth, dark face grinning toothlessly, not now 'the first white woman on the Black Ant Creek,' but a medicine-woman, a sorceress of some lost people, playing on the strings of life that men might dance for pleasure of her gods: 'Dance, children, dance, my honeys!' And Old Backs cried shrilly: 'Fill 'em up, boys... We paid for our fun these last five years!'

The fire burnt lower and painted the faces of the dancers with crimson, staining the dresses of the girls to strange hues, as it fell upon their crude red and rose, emerald and blue. Bared brown shoulders

gleamed with the heat of the rooms, dark torrents of hair shook loose about full-flushed faces, long lashes drooped on languid cheeks, and men's lips pressed the tangled warmth of a girl's hair, or full young cheeks, or firm hot mouth. Or, as they danced through, and lingered with tapping feet in some shadow, grew bolder and found the over-full, scent-redolent curves of throat or bosom, bared by a garish dress in strange travesty of latest fashion. And then perhaps they danced off the verandah and a little way across the dust, and strolled away over the blue-white expanse of moonlight to where quivered the dark blue lines of the dead box trees frosted with moon-silver...

Georgina's beauty shone amongst the overblown brilliance of her sisters and the visiting Murgan girls with a dark, aloof perfection, for Georgina had always been the beauty of the Backs' daughters. Also Georgina was only seventeen and the next sister was twenty, while the Murgan girls were very experienced — and it was not so long since Georgina had sat on the long bench by the wall until she fell asleep amongst the piled puppies and babies!

Georgina's dress was of green sateen with innumerable flounces down its full skirt, and about her waist was bound a flowing, slightly frayed sky-blue ribbon, and on the bodice that was too full for Georgina's just-showing breasts were sky-blue spangles. Beneath her skirt showed her high-instepped perfect feet in dirty blue satin slippers and black cotton stockings — and yet for all these gay-hued disabilities she looked like the young spring of life and youth and passion, and her lips were a haughty flower and in her eyes the nights of the world where strange fires played.

She was very proud, for she had danced all evening with young Arteran, but now, although it was only twelve o'clock, she was tired. She said, 'Let's go out a bit.' And although she said it with imperial carelessness, she was excited with her power, which she read in his eyes. And yet she was afraid, too...

Young Arteran followed her, and she saw in his face the look that all her life she had seen men give women, and its import, and the drunkenness of the music and the night, and the unknownness of life set her heart beating in her throat so that suddenly she was not afraid! And she leant half against his shoulder and smiled at him, playing the game that all women played... And he leant to her, his dark face aflame with the fire that so far as Georgina knew all women tried to wake, and he whispered, 'My Queen, my Beauty...' and as she slipped from him he laughed and said, 'There's better music in the world than Mother Backs' even... Shall we find it, Star of the Night? Dark Rose!' And as always his utterances — of another world that she could only half understand — thrilled Georgina, although she laughed and answered, 'Why don't you never talk English?'

As they crossed the verandah he lifted a heavy soft rug of home-tanned 'possum and wrapped it doubled around her.

'You are...' said young Arteran — 'You are, I think, the most lovely thing in the world... Do you understand that, Little Queen?' From the great silver-blue cape of the 'possum fur Georgina looked back at him with drooping eyelids. She said, hardily, boldly, 'I've 'eard it often enough!'

The moonlight glittered on her hair, bathed the dark velvet of her face, and caught a spark of light

from the defiant, troubled beauty of her lips. At the gate she paused... For, for all her garish finery and the red rubbed into her cheeks, and the regal blue-grey cape of fur, Georgina was only just seventeen — and it was not long since she had slept safely amongst the piled babies and puppies on the bench by the wall.

Young Arteran put his arms across the gateway so that she might not go back, and she saw him laugh at her in the moonlight, then he put one arm about her and drew her against him, pressing his face on her young neck, whispering with his lips against it:

'Why not, Georgina? Why not, why not? We've only just so many nights to live — *don't waste them!* Only so few nights and days, oh, Little and Cruel!... And you were *made* for love, Georgina!' Behind them reeled the madness of music; before them across the white fire of the flat stood the dead, secret box trees in their silent forest... Georgina did not struggle, for she liked young Arteran with his strange, easy speech, and the tales men told of his recklessness and mad courage... And to his philosophy she had no answer. He said:

'All life's cruel, Georgina... all life ends — to-day, to-morrow! If there are gods, they must laugh if we lose our little moment's joy...! Where do the little daisies go, Georgina, when the dust wind blows them away?'

Her head drooped slightly, she sighed, fiercely defying shadows, and the briefness of life, and the blowing drought winds — and she felt him smile against her neck.

From across the flat, from somewhere in the tree-shadows came the sound of muffled laughter, hard

and gay! He said, 'Your sisters are wiser, and the ladies of Murgan.'

'Perhaps...' said Georgina. 'Perhaps...'

She stood with her foot tapping the moonlit earth. For Georgina knew of the shortness and the cruelty of life, and she knew that the little lilac daisies which came after the rains bloomed once and died and blew away with the dust. Georgina laughed, suddenly, hardily, as her elder sisters laughed (and the girl in the shadow), and her face grew older somehow. Twisting she raised up her mouth, pouted for a kiss, and before he could kiss it, she broke from him and darted away! Young Arteran closed the gate and followed her. She led him across the white flat, then in and out of the grim shadows of the dead box-tree forest, now into revealing white fire, now through shadows so dark that to step into them was like losing personality: being swallowed... Near the old horse paddock gate Georgina wheeled suddenly with her back to a great box-tree trunk radiant with moonlight... The rug opened about her and showed the beauty of her throat and bare arms spread against the tree, mirth as of a pagan nymph parting her red mouth and showing the flash of her teeth.

She cried in a voice clear, hard, ringing with gaiety: 'If I really ran, you could *niver* catch me!'

He stood before her, smiling at her, panting from their race, exultant and forbearing with victory: 'But why should you run?' he whispered. 'Why, Georgina?'

'Why?' questioned Georgina aloud of the shimmering silent world, and young Arteran whose dark face laughed at her. Then she looked from the unanswer-

ing sky to the moonlit dust of the road, where long, long ago the horse tracks had shown like strange flower patterns on grey cloth: 'Still — I'm going to...' said Georgina, in a voice suddenly magical as the night with tenderness, young with elfin laughter... And dropping the rug she was gone like some sprite of the moon.

She ran until she felt her heart beating against her throat and then found that she was standing in a round bowl-like opening amongst the trees with the great moon right overhead. A silent bowl filled with dark blue light, like water when a swimmer dives beneath it with open eyes and sees his white arms as ghosts moving through the magic blue-green loneliness that locks him in, and the moon is a great golden platter floating on the surface of the sea... And the fearful remoteness from all things save the reflected watery moon drives him gasping to the surface!

And Georgina stood motionless imprisoned in the still blue place by the white moon and the circled silence.

She knelt as she had so many years before with her locked hands pressed in the dust, her head bent forward.

'Oh, you Donald, come soon — or stay away!' said Georgina. 'I can't run allers...'

XIII

THERE came a time when Old H. B.'s mortgagees suggested that it might be necessary for him 'to leave in the near future' — unless he had 'at least eight inches of rain' and could buy 'cheap sheep,' in which case they would give him a little further support, as he 'was an old and valued client.' (Even this intangible offer was, he knew, prompted by the memory of how long Tharlane had been 'the rotten egg' of Government and bank.)

They added that, in the event of his having to leave, they would have no objection to removing for him anything (not mentioned in the mortgage) to which his wife might have 'become attached.'

He replied, thanking them courteously and intimating that he would take advantage of their offer — if, and when, he had to start — as Mrs. Henrics was passionately fond of the dead currajong by the cow-yard! He further mentioned that, as the tree stood about sixty feet high, they would probably find it easier to remove in sections...

Still these little interchanges were but episodes, although spicy, and small comfort for the sterile years — which should have been the years of conflict and of mastery! He put his hand on the bars of drafting gates through which the huddled woolly sheep should have pressed, bringing him their wool-wealth; caressed the heavy pumping-rods of sub-artesian bores whose capacity had never been tested, and groaned... or, bronzed and sullen, relapsed into silence.

All men of the West had watched the storms belly

out of the south growling and dark; form fantastic battlements above the barren world, casting great shadows on the bare red earth, and then vanish in a swirling of dust and a howling of hot wind across the empty land... They had seen faint intangible grey fill the hard bowl of the sky as with the grey mist of rain, and then, as choking hope was rising, develop into the mystic, blinding chill of a dust storm, filling the air with cold dry spindrift fine as vapour. They had seen, month after month, about the horizons the futile, interminable flickering of heat lightning, but never the swift lash of a shower. According to their nature they had sworn or prayed, or grown tired of both swearing and praying: and hope at last seemed fragile as the white lakes of the mirage that glittered endlessly in the heat.

Then in the seventh year there came days of heat fiercer than even the long years of heat... And great cloud-spumes of white wool filled all the southern sky, and beneath them hung purple depths of storm and thunder which shook the earth, while the continual white fire of lightning ran earthward through the cloud-masses.

The whole air was electric, and sparks flew from a man's hair beneath the hand.

The clouds filled the whole sky bulging and purple, rolling on themselves, embroidered with fire.

Old H. B. puffed and snorted in the heat as he rode his solitary mount into the little streets of Murgan, and in the storm-light the dust rose in pale ghastly whirls about the animal's hoofs. They would finance him to buy cheap sheep, would they? *After* he had had at least eight inches of rain!

He was not likely to be favoured with a local rain

— he could see nothing in his life to justify a special miracle in his behalf! And when the Great Drought broke, there would be no 'cheap sheep' in Australia!

With longing that made his lips roll and his little upturned moustache bristle yearningly, he had read last week of a flock of well-bred old ewes in the Far North... cheap old ewes! ... The perfect start for the Tharlane flocks! *If only his 'blankety financers' would have let him take them 'for forward delivery'!*

Old H. B. went to the telegraph office and looked long at the sky. Then he pulled out the particulars of the fifteen thousand 'cast-for-age ewes in lamb by Derford rams.'

When the rains came they would be priceless! — And still he was not to be allowed to risk the little sum that would make them his!

Unless he could arrange for the purchase of sheep, he must lose Tharlane — and perhaps again the red dingoes would breed there! He looked long at the thunder-clouds ... and risked his all in a lie. To his mortgagees he telegraphed: 'Ten inches and still raining, closing for Dallbree ewes.' And to the owners, 'Accepting without inspection at your price,' and followed it with a letter because a telegram might not stand at law.

When, three days later, Old H. B. rode back to Tharlane, it was through the roaring dark of rain.

In his old secret heart he thanked his gods of Luck — for luck incredible!... And by the end of next week the price of all accessibly placed ewes was up to treble the amount at which he had bought.

From the swamps came the booming drum-note of

the frogs. Sedge sprang from pools whose existence men had forgotten.

And, as a crowning joy, a final benediction, Old H. B. received a letter from his unsuspecting mortgagees congratulating him on his 'most timely and fortunate purchase' — and read it aloud to his cook. 'Two years from now,' he said, great fist smiting the deal table and swollen face purpled — 'Two bloody years h'an' h'I'll be h'in credit h'an' h'I'll go h'into their crimson office, h'an' put me feet h'on their table h'an' sput h'on their carpic... h'as 'ard h'as h'ever h'I can sput!'

Again he tasted the hot wine of creation! Again there was work to tax every fat-sheathed muscle and draw upon each deep well of cunning!

Fiercest delight of all delights his sheep were on the way from the North!

Life rushed back to the land again, with such an upspringing, such flowering tides of gladness, as even the waking from a frozen winter cannot show...

It seemed to Old H. B. that the very sap ran high in exultation after the seven years of waiting! Again there seemed no seasons — only blossoming!

In the true spring, which followed the flowering winter, Donald the Shearer came back from the North: across the miles of the open downs where the brown larks sang; by ash-grey stockyards where the white corallas settled like massed sparkling orchard flowers and broke in shrieking snow-clouds in the sun, and past little hot dry gullies filled with thornbushes where all the small birds of the plains built tiny soft-lined nests, and the big hawks wheeled all day long

against the sky... And in every town men greeted him, and urged his staying, for the sake of his merry eyes and golden tongue. But he waited only for food and drink; and the moons which rise redly, biting a circle from the vast edge of the plain, saw him riding south; midnight found him rolled in his blankets at the roadside under the field of stars. And dawn saw man and horse moving south again — the man's grey-blue, alert, and dancing eyes looking out under the brim of his old wide hat, his back curved in at the waist with its own erectness!

... And so at last he rode out onto the little opens about the Old Backs Homestead on The Block, when the galvanized burr-bushes were ghost-grey with evening; and all was as it had always been, the thin smoke rising from the low ant-bed chimney showing blue against the dark trees by the creek and dusky against the amber sky; the scuttering fowls going to bed, the clustered goats settled for the night, and on the old grey tree above the yards a rosy blossoming of bright-breasted galah parrots ranged like evenly placed flowers of rose and grey along each broken branch — flowers, which, even as he watched, fled shrieking and veering away to roost...

A burnt bare baby sprawled on its stomach in the white dust at the door, looking up at him from dark, unfathomable eyes and rolling in its pudgy lips as he stepped over it. And then, walking lightly round the great chimney, he came up behind Old Mother Backs where she sat smoking in the dusk.

He put his hands across her age-bleared eyes and said: 'Guess who's here, mother!'

Her pipe fell from her toothless mouth with the wideness of her smile.

'Donald! My baby! My liddle one out of the North! Donnie the rider that rode 'em all! An' th' best shot! An' th' best shearer an' axe-man! An' th' best man!... Donnie!... Donnie!... *Donnie!*' Her voice caught a wailing croon of gladness and she pulled him to the arm of her chair and looked up into his broad face with a beaming love lighting all her seamed and furrowed old one. 'Have you come back to get me some gran'childer — of your own wiv Georgina?' she asked frankly, and the red flowed up into his wide face, but he answered:

'If she'll have me, mother!'

'She'll have you if it's in her coffin!' said the old lady with vigour. 'If I have to twist her neck for you!'

'That seems kind o' sudden,' said he, patting her withered shoulder. 'I hoped as maybe she'd have me without.'

'She may, my lamb, my lovely, my liddle one,' said Mother Backs with a return of the crooning note, then added, 'But if she don't, come to *me*, my honey, my duck, my laddie!'

'Bet I won't need you, mother,' he said, laughing and kissing her. 'Where is she?'

'On the wood-heap, most like — the far heap near the pigs. She's took to settin' there lately to the evening — don't know if they reminds her of you, honey,' she added with a malign chuckle. 'But God go with you — you be needing help!' Then she shrilled after his departing figure: 'I'll not tell the others till tucker time!'

Beyond the needlewood tangle and the rubbish heap and the pig trough was the great drying stack of firewood — the one evidence of foresight in the Backs household, all of whose members dreaded cold....

Donald could walk very softly when he chose, and he rounded the great grey heap without sound, disturbing only the little black bats who lived in the dry hollows of the logs and came out at dusk.

Georgina sat bent forward on her knees, her clasped hands hanging almost to the earth. Her white dress looked bluish, the skin of her full bent neck pale honey colour. He thought her sleeping; he thought her the essence of all loveliness; the answer of all hunger.

He cried softly, strongly: 'Georgina!' and he half wished to frighten her so that she might look at him again as she had looked ten years before when she had said, 'I thought you was the Devil!'

Instead she raised her head slowly, indifferently, and, without even looking at him, she answered: 'Yes,' as though she had long known that he would come just then.

He moved swiftly before her and caught her hands: 'It's Donald, Georgina!'

She glanced up at him and said, 'Indeed'; and she looked him up and down with dark, critical eyes and withdrew her hands.

'And,' said he, 'what's more, I've come to marry thee, Georgina Backs!'

She quoted slowly from a story he had told long ago by Old Backs' fire; her voice thick and deep mockery at her lips: '"It takes two to do most things, mind you, an' if you'll show me as how you're goin' to make these nice arrangements *without me* — then I'll take a interest in them!"'

He sat beside her and put his arm about her swiftly and whispered: 'So you remembered me very words, me lightest words! You flatters me, Georgina! Sure you does... But as I was saying — I've come to

marry you, an' I haven't made me fortune — though I stayed seeking it when me very heart cried "Georgina! Georgina! Georgina!" But I've got my two arms, and they're strong and they're *yours*, Georgina! And we've got the whole o' the bush an' an old horse. An' where love is...'

'Which might be well for you — but what of me?'

'... *there* is riches! An' we'll have a great fire at nights an' the 'possums'll come tryin' to sneak our flour, an' sometimes, when you hear the dingoes howlin' an' there's too many stars, maybe you'll get a bit creepy-like — but I'll be there with me arm round you an' me broad breast...'

'You may be there an' so may the dingoes and the 'possums — I shall not, Donald Barford!' But he thought she was smiling.

'... An' I'll keep you safe from beasts an' men... An' with the fire a-roarin', what better place is there than a camp with the grass smells blowin' in — that is, if there be grass to smell! — an' sometimes when I'm cuttin' the logs we'll find a comb o' wild honey...'

'An' if I *was* there, I prefers my honey without sticks an' beetles an' dead ants, thank you!'

'... An', maybe, there'd be a little fellow there as would like the honey, Georgie, an' he'll lie there a-suckin' his small thumbs as sticky wi' honey as a burr wi' thorns — *yours an' mine, Georgina*... Georgina!' whispered he of the golden tongue. 'What's ailin' you? My girl, my little Girl, I didn't mean to shock you! Only in the night an' the watches, when there seemed t' be only me — an' miles o' loneliness! — I've thought somewhat o' those things — don't say me "No," *Georgina!* Georgina, I'm lonely for thee, and athirst for thee! An' such as I am I'm yours,

Georgina, an' I love you, an' I've loved you since ever you were the littlest fellow 'at took me for the Devil, an' there can't never be for me no other woman, Georgina — as I've found out, as you might say! An' I loves you, Georgie, an' you aren't going to say me "No"! When you has my Heaven just for givin'...'

She, with her face turned away, said slowly: 'You want me — very *sure?*'

'More 'an the goods o' the world, an' the riches o' men! I'd die for thee an' live for thee, Georgina — name the price I wouldna pay for thee!'

'Y'r sure?'

'As God looks down on me at this minute!'

'I think I could tell y' a price...'

'Not as I wouldn' pay, me love! me lily as is only sweeter for growin' in th' mud! What price on the earth wouldn't I pay of!'

'I don't think I'll tell you,' she said, with slow defiance in smouldering eyes, lips parted, throat bent back.

'Why? 'Cause you doubts me love...'

'Because — I daren't lose it!' she whispered with a wild burst of laughter. 'Hold me! Hold me! Hold me, Donald! or I'll — *go away!*'

'I will!' he said between strong kisses. 'I will, my girl!'

But as he released her to look into her face, she shook free and was gone, while his cheek burnt from the sting of her palm.

'I won't marry of you!' she called.

'But thee will surely,' he said. 'Thee but needs th' mind made up!'

XIV

'A HONEYMOON resigns people to 'most anythin',' said Old Backs. 'But seldom to stoppin' at home: still you can only get married right away if you mind the place while me family an' meself go a fishin' trip... Now 'at the thievin' element has left the district, an' we have got a police force what's a credit to the country, times is not what they were.... An' it don't do to leave your house for long or most of your belongin's leaves it too!'

Mother Backs' concertina wailed softly of the onflowing of life from the eternal to the eternal, dreaming, frustrated, exultantly striving. Brown children and many-coloured dogs rolled in the warmth of the fire. A fat blind litter of ten 'cattle-puppies' slept by a spotted bitch's side; a chubby baby-nosed, fat-tailed heap of slumbering infancy, whose eyes were sealed that they might see no evil and ears closed that they might hear none.

Dorna Backs, at home for her fifth child, nodded and knitted in the glow, while Donald bent to Georgina in the window-seat and whispered:

'Did hear that, my flower?'

'No,' said she, looking past him, 'I were thinking.'

'Of me, sweet?' he asked, bringing his face so close that she must look at him or shut her eyes.

She shut them and said, 'No.'

'Of some one else?'

'Yes,' she answered with her eyes still shut, and had not the fire's rose stained it, her face would have seemed very white.

'Do thee often think o' him?'

She opened her eyes and looked into his own, with the infinitely old mocking look that puzzled him.

'Oh, often, often, often!' said Georgina, swinging her head to the music. 'Often, often...'

'An' may I ask who the devil he be?'

'You can ask,' she said with her strange smile.

'Come, now, he baint as handsome a chap as me?'

'Much handsomer.'

'An' taller?'

'Yes.'

'But not the same fine *good* sort of chap as me?'

'Be any one good?' said Georgina, shutting her eyes again.

'*Good?* Why, think o' *me!*'

'Leave me alone!' she said with sudden fierceness. 'I don't want to think of you!'

He leant forward until his lips were at her ear and his hands closed over hers.

'But I'll make thee think o' me soon, my little hawk, my wild one, an' o' me, an' me, an' me, an' only me in all the rollin' world!'

'Mother,' cried Georgina, 'play us a dance! I want to dance!'

'One dance, then, my childern,' said Mother Backs serenely. 'Th' Bush Brother's due here to-morrow, an' presently we got to go out an' run down 'is dinner.'

'Two dances an' I'll help pluck it meself,' said Donald the Shearer. 'I could dance on the moonlights, Georgina, an' they wouldn't feel me! We're to be married to-morrow, Georgina!... An' to-morrow you'll not think o' *him*!'

Her feet fled in the measures of the dance, and she did not answer. 'We're to be married to-morrow,

Georgina!... Soon, very soon — an' yet I don't think to live long enough to put me ring on your hand!'

'Oh, it's as well to be married *soon*,' she said softly, 'or we might'n be married at all.'

'My liddle rogue!' said he, as he spoke to a trembling, fighting horse. 'You couldn' say me no, an' you must say me yes!'

'Oh, I must,' she said.

'Come and catch the hennies,' said the old woman, laying down her concertina. 'Some one find the axe!'

'Hi, gramma, *lemme* have the axe!' cried Giles Backs, galvanizing into action.

'No,' said his grandmother firmly, hobbling toward the door and using the weapon as a staff. 'You *can't* have the axe! Last time you clopped the fowl to middle 'stead of to the end — so it was spoilt for all but stewing...! There are,' she added for Donald's instruction, 'four ways of approachin' the roosts...'

'Which frightens the hennies off four different directions,' said Old Backs, who had come to see the dinner captured, although he proposed to take no active part.

'... You can come at them from the shade of the cow-shed an' make a spring,' continued Mother Backs, 'or you can go up slowly from all around, an' hopes they stays fast till you're to springing reach — though that way baint as good as it were sinst the childern caught some to last New Year. Them as is still livin' seems nervy like... I think as the best way now be to cover yourselves with bags an' crawl up to 'em on your stomachs. That seems to keep 'em interested like, till you're within grabbin' distance, even if they wakes.... You needn't begin to crawl yet,' she

added to her retainers, who were by this time gradually advancing upon the wood-heap, grey and black in the moonlight, and dotted with sleeping hens, seemingly trustful as doves...

At about twenty feet from the heap, the younger Backs covered themselves with bags and began a rapid, stealthy crawl toward the roosting birds. When they were within some five feet of their goal, one old white hen withdrew her head from beneath her wing; her wagging comb and moon-gleaming eye alike expressive of alarm. The whole family of Backs froze in its place, but Donald, being at some distance from the questioning comb, ventured to clear his throat, with what was, for so large a man, a remarkably small and discreet sound. The effect was terrible, the white hen screeched and shot upwards, and from all the heap there seemed to emanate a succession of feathered, clucking catapults. The hens had no idea whence danger threatened, but one thing appeared to be firmly fixed in their usually slow-working minds, and that was that it did not pay to wait and find out.

Cackling and moon-dazzled and drunken with sleep, they fled far and wide across the flat, careening away like wind-driven, leaping snowflakes in the moonlight, with the House of Backs literally one jump behind, and Mother Backs following at creditable speed with the gleaming axe.

'Don't chivy 'em all! Gather yourselves on two!' she wailed. 'You'll fright them in a minute an' spoil their eggshells for a year... Oh, blank you!... You blanks!'

Donald, who apparently felt that he was too ignorant of the technique of capturing a Backs dinner to

be of much use to his hostess, leaned against the wood-heap shaken with silent laughter which made him wipe the back of either great hand across his eyes.

Then close to the heap and sneaking stealthily round it in the shadows, he perceived a small grey hen. He waited until only the slightly crooked end of her tail was visible around the curve of a log and then advanced with the swift stealth of the hunter — only to hear a squawk of despair from his intended victim as Georgina picked it up.

... She was standing in the shadows, and she bent her face to the hen as she held it in her arms, as though she was feeling its plumpness.

He said: 'We've beat 'em all, Georgie! By the sounds they haven't come up with one yet! — Georgina, now's the very chance as you've been waitin' for to give me that real big, bonny kiss you has for me!'

Her lovely head hung lower.

'Then,' said he, 'I'll take it,' and he stepped forward only to find the hen in his arms and Georgina leaning in the deeper shadow against the farther wood-pile. He tucked the hen beneath his arm and smoothed its rumpled feathers preparatory to following up the advantage of having Georgina all to himself in the walled space between the dry stack and the green... and then he rubbed the fluffed troubled feathers again with a question in his blunt fingers — for he had found them wet.

He set the hen down quickly and came and stood before his love, squarely as a man should, speaking his heart as a man should: 'Georgie, you been weepin' on that old hennie. Now listen, love, there be somethin' troubling you — can you not tell o' me?'

She shook her head with a gesture of despair.

'Will *I* tell thee, then?' he whispered, the Quaker rising in his speech as it did sometimes in hours of love: 'will I show thee what it be?' and she raised her eyes; so dark and large that they made her dark face seem small and white.

'Be it that thee does not love thy Old Donald as thee would like to? An' yet loves him too much to send him away?... Well, thee mustn't worry, for I wouldn't hurt thee nor hurry thee, though we was married a hundred time...! So if thee likes me but doesn't love me, or loves me just a little, then, if thee trusts me enough to marry me, Georgina, I'll no ask of thee anything except to let me see thee — until 'e says to me, "I love thee, Donald."'

He bent until he looked into those great eyes.

'My darlin' trusts me?'

She nodded slowly, but with the same slow hopelessness of gesture.

'Thee couldn't say it *now*? Just "Donald, I love thee."'

She covered her face.

'But thee will marry me?'

'Yes,' she said in a strange, deep voice.

'Then,' he said, bending to her with ardent eyes, 'if I cannot make my own wife love me, I be a poor man!... May I wrap me chicken bag round us both? It be terrible chilly,' he added, in a tone that through pure artistry made cold even the radiant summer night. She leant against him as if walking was an effort almost too great to bear.

The little hen smoothed her strangely dampened feathers and crept back to bed.

At the yard gate they met Old Mother Backs reviling a family who had returned with one skinny, half-grown pullet, and as Donald and Georgina approached, she even turned upon her lord for the first time in a history of many wrongs borne in silence and hurts nigh unto death.

'Why didn't you help, you lazy old blank?' cried Mother Backs, almost weeping. 'Me wantin' to have things nice for the weddin' a morrow, an' the fattest bird on the roost runs between your legs — an' you lets him go on runnin'.'

'I'm not a-goin' boundin' over the paddocks like a hawk-struck rabbit for forty weddin's and a funeral thrown in!' said Old Backs shrilly, and yet somewhat shaken by unprecedented revolt.

'You could 't least have sat down,' said his wife reproachfully, 'an' you'd 'a' had him!'

She drifted away down the moonlit verandah, the spotted cattle bitch eagerly licking up the drops of blood from the morrow's dinner.

And next day the Bush Brother came, dusty and tired, overworked and underpaid, and the puppies and the babies were shovelled away while in solitary state he partook of a wild-legged rubbery fowl. Finding himself also somewhat embarrassed by the uneating stare of the whole Backs family.

Then in due time he made a huge ruddy man and a maid who looked like Beatrice Cenci man and wife, and when in the process he called the man 'Donald Bafford,' the huge man respectfully corrected him, being apparently determined to be married legally.

'My name an' title be Barford, sir, B-A-R-F-O-R-D — I don't want no other chap to come a-claimin' o' me wife!'

And then the Bush Brother had gone — driving two horses which he could not drive in an effort to see to the marryings and being born and dyings of a parish considerably bigger than Great Britain. And the House of Backs had also gone — whooping and yelling with banging of tins and barking of dogs. And Donald went down across the creek to pitch a big tent and to pile sapling beds with fresh branches, where long ago he had found a small girl fishing so often in the pointed shadows of the gum leaves. For although he loved the Old Backs Homestead, it did not meet with his ideas of what a honeymoon should smell like.

When the camp was finished he sang in the dusk and fed his silent bride with good things of his own cooking and did the washing up where he could see her.

'It's our first *home*, my flower! Think o' that, an' our home'll be together now till we both do die, Georgina! The one track an' the one fire all life long — for you an' for me...!'

There was vast stillness about them and the old grey tree away by the stockyards was all in flower with pink-breasted parrots, and Donald of the golden tongue dropped on one knee beside his love and whispered, '... An' one tent to shut out dark an' the rain an' the frost, an' me to work for thee an' live for thee an' die for thee if was need...'

And she turned to him with abandonment of grief and cried: 'Oh, if you'll jus' keep me, Donald...'

'Keep thee?' said he. 'Let me see the man as will take thee away! Let me see thee try to leave me!'

His arms were about her shoulders and her throat and face hung back, broken-seeming, deathlike in

the twilight that would soon be mixed with moonlight.

Faintly, as if her life ceased with the words, as though lips and breath could hardly form them, she said: 'I be goin' to have a little bebby, Donald... I had shouldn't have married you.'

His face was white, but he held her so that she could not see his face, and he met the knock as a man should meet even the undreamed, deep-wounding blow in the dark — when he has guessed no enemy; met it with squared shoulders and filled chest in silence. Strongly he stopped her mouth with a kiss; then presently he let her go a little and blue eyes looked into brown.

'Seems to me as what you be tellin' me is but another reason — so be as you loves me a little!'

She said: 'Oh, Donald!'

The last grey-and-pink parrots had gone to bed and the moon was coming up large and gold behind the dusty whiteness of the flat and the dark timber line. He held her now much as he had ten years before. 'My li'l' lamb,' he said, 'it baint your fault that life hits a woman harder nor a man... There, li'l' love, we didn' make the world!... There, there, my little love, li'l' love o' me... Don' cry like o' that, for pity, don' cry like *that*...! Hush, darlin' — or I'll tell you me own past now! An' then you'll wish as you never married such a sinful brute!... *I've warned you now* — I'll begin!'

She kissed his hands, clung in the shelter of his arms, snuggling her head beneath his coat, breathless with weeping. '... Oh, Donald, don't it make no difference? I thought you would send me away... Oh, you loves me? It don't make you not love me?'

'Triplets wouldn't!' said he who knew how to live... 'Nor fourplets — if that be the word!... Let me tuck you in an' sing you to sleep again, little small...' He lifted her lightly and strongly and carried her to the tent.

She whispered, 'Oh, glad, glad... Oh, I can't believe... Donald, I 'ave been so tired, so lone!'

He said decisively, as one ending the matter, 'I'm here.'

Just as he thought her sleeping, she sat up suddenly and asked in a frightened voice: 'Donald, you won't hate *him* when he's born?'

He held her hands steadily in the dark: 'Bless you, I aren't a man to blame a man for what he's had no voice in!' Then, leaning till his lips touched her ear and his cheek her cheek wet with tears, he whispered, 'Bet you he'd have chose me...'

His voice came to her on the last verge of sleep.

'Georgie, thee might have thought better o' me... thee needn't have cried so on the little hennie.'

XV

Had Old H. B. not weighed twenty-six stone, he would have sent his old horse at a trot — for he went, at last, to meet his sheep! The creeping-on of his fence lines; the thump of the boring plants — all these things had pleased him and quickened the slow beating of his heart, but they were only the means to this end: the coming of the little foolish sheep!

Three miles beyond the north gates he heard the sounds of the flock and halted to await it... They came cautiously from the green dusk of a sandalwood scrub onto a little open box flat: old worn-faced ewes, obstinate and alarmed. They paused, and sought to return, and then the pressure from behind pushed them out and they came with a rapid, stiff, yet mincing walk. The step of one was intertangled with that of the next; their positions changed so that little local eddies ran through them, their backs altered their angles to the light, and yet always they advanced. The effect of their movement was one of a flowing substance, rather than of separate creatures that moved on their four legs.

They flowed out and out from the sandalwood scrub and came on across the open; the stupid sameness of their faces held forward questioningly, and from them rose a ceaseless whispering, plaintive bleating, and the sound of sixty thousand little feet. Small sounds that, through the mere force of repetition and a running insistence, became a great sound. The sound that a vast river of pebbles might make flowing 'down a steep place into the sea...' And as the old ewes came

with little steps round burr-bush and tussock and stone, and across the green and silver and gold of the box flat, or the red moist earth of the road, they wove the wonderful pattern of sheep pads. For the first sheep left a little sharp hoofprint in the red earth, and the next cut it into a pattern of stars or triangles, and the next and the next, and the hundredth was following a little trampled path; and when the thousandth passed, there was the little hollowed winding river of a dusty pad... Their old worn faces bobbing and peering, their bodies heavy with fleece and lamb, their little feet stepping discreetly, they were weaving the net wherewith Australia has been bound to the white man....

The men worked back and forth about them, back and forth... and back... The sheep poured on with their strangely narcotic sound...

Presently Old H. B. was surprised by meeting the Drover Abel Crosset — who had brought the sheep down from the North, but had 'delivered' them to Old Buck Burns some days before (on the ground that he, Abel Crosset, was not feeling strong enough to see Old H. B.).

At sight of the owner of Tharlane, Drover Abel's eye was lit by a truculent dancing light, for he noticed that the other men were out of earshot, and that therefore he could speak without infringing the code that sayeth you shall not tell a man what he is before the men who must obey him: at least not merely for pleasure.

'How are the baa's doing, Abe?' asked Old H. B.

'They are doing,' said Drover Abel jauntily, 'much like sheep!'

Old H. B., giver of insults, could at times swallow

one if it were a dainty. He leered pleasantly, and asked: 'How's the wife? She felt the 'eat much?'

Drover Abel shifted his pipe slightly, and remarked unpleasantly: 'She is well. Thank you.'

He then offered with considerable emphasis, as explanation of his wife's well-being, that she, Mrs. Crosset, was not married to a type of man whom he described as 'a bullying, bluffing, cowardly bale of sausage meat,' as were certain unfortunate women of his acquaintance! He further added that he, Drover Abel, was not the sort of creature that made fun of a woman's poor 'little bits of pretties,' to show off before every blear-eyed, pale-faced, weak-kneed Murgan barkeeper he knew! He still further said that he was very grateful for all this, and that if ever he felt depressed he thought, Well, thank God, he was not like the kind of creature he had just described as an undesirable type of spouse!

And here showed the certain greatness that was in Old H. B., for although he enjoyed this address, with its rather indelicate implications, no more than another man would have, his great bronzed face never changed in line or hue; and he sat impassive as a great complacent idol. He even refrained from saying, as a lesser man might have said, that it was well for Drover Abel, or that he would have acted differently, had he, Old H. B., been younger. He knew that this was not the case: doing Abel Crosset full justice.

The Drover was unaware of this, and, as his simple eyes strove to read the impassive, slightly scornful mask of Old H. B.'s face, he said truculently:

'You needn't go flattering yourself that if you were a young man I'd act differently to you. For one thing, my own hair's dyed with the silver, and for an-

other, if you were a young man I'd have a try to have you out of that saddle if you was Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries rolled in one! Put that in your pipe and smoke it!'

Old H. B. looked at him with his head a little on one side, as we look at an interesting and wholly pleasing curio. Knowing that, although Abel Crosset might insult him, he got little satisfaction out of it — and that he, Old H. B., could always infuriate the less complex man!

Then he asked with guttural sarcasm: ''Ow long h'are you doin' me the honour of stoppin' on me job?'

'I wish I'd never been on any job of yours and, in future, I won't be seen dead in a ditch with one!' cried Drover Abel, the sparks of anger snapping in his eyes. 'In fact, I'm off it now — have been for three days! But I found I had to go this way... And I was helpin' with these sheep to pass the time of day... But I don't know as I'm not gettin' bored! I feel fatigued! I need me smelling salts and fan!' said Drover Abel, his great chest swelling with satire. 'You interest me,' he added. 'You surely do, H. B. When the Powers-That-Be were mixin' you together they left somethin' out—it's hard to say quite what, but the somethin' that makes *a man!* Oh, I know that I'm only a common drover an' you're a man of property, but you'll never buy that little somethin'! If you'll pardon me for mentioning it.'

Old H. B.'s face was impassive and heavy bronzed and rather sleepy-looking, but his great hand, could Drover Abel have seen it, was momentarily clenched in the lash of his coiled whip. Still it was not his insults that he resented; it was the thick-set honest-eyed man's freedom from those secret cowardices and

dreads that most men never dreamed that he, H. B., possessed or hid!

He despised fear... and he feared many things! Chief amongst them the thought of what vengeance a man might plan as he lay in prison... Still, much might happen in the years which stretched between him and the thing he feared: between him and a small man's freedom for the fulfilment of any vengeance...

And although Old H. B. might have cried gruntingly, 'A touch, sir!' he simply laughed a throaty chuckle that still more greatly exasperated Drover Abel as he rode wrathfully away. Old H. B. even fully realized the Drover's mortification over having been finally betrayed by his love of sheep into stopping with the flock until they reached Tharlane!

Old H. B. heaved a snorting breath, and to himself he said that he had done many things and great, while Abel Crosset was only a drover, and that Abel Crosset would still be but a drover when he, Old H. B., was becoming a rich man, great in the land!

Yet, because of the something great in his most complex make-up, he knew that, though all these things might be true, he could never buy that which had been left out of him; and whose absence had sent the Little Man to gaol for twenty years so that when he came out he would have only about five or so years to live... The thing whose omission made Old H. B. cringe to the Drover who insulted him, and bully those who did not — and he knew also that he would always rather want it!

Then — as in the grip of a great passion all things lead a man's thought back to the vision of the beloved — as solace for his secret cowardice and secret shame and for his weight of flesh and years, and

all other things that he would in certain hours have had otherwise or that always irked him, he grasped the shining thought of Tharlane — 'The Plains of the Sun' — with their petals and scents and flowers, and pale-gleaming, many-coloured grass, whose beauty no man save he could master! In his own more prosaic phrase 'make a do h'on!'

Caught by the glancing wave of his secret emotion, which for him was stronger than any love of women, or of honour, or ideal, he forgot Drover Abel as he had forgotten an amber-eyed he-goat that had baaed its mockery at him so long ago as he sat on the old railway engine in the dawn light...

He cared not over what humiliations he had reached the altar of his soul, by what rites he served it!

He was even glad to note that Drover Abel was still skilfully piloting the on-flowing sheep through the sandalwoods, and out onto the flat... Their little trails, which broke and flowed, and met again, wove for Old H. B. a web of deep content that no discord of man could break!

He was acutely conscious of the great blue-gold bowl of weather through which he rode, of the narcotic sound of the moving sheep, the growing warmth of the sun. Every wandering scent which drifted past him, or through whose still, invisible tide he moved, gave him its message sharply clear.... That was the deathly sweet of the white nicotiana; that the ethereal scent of bluebells, which have no scent at all until there are thousands of them; that the perfumed sunshine of the yellow boronia; now the sheep among the tall pale grass were crushing wild parsley sharp and cool...

Presently he fell in with his crony Buck. Both knew their bush in minutest detail; knew their way by stars or sun; the life ways of the animals wild and domestic amongst which their lives were spent!

And yet their years in the infinities of lonely lands did not prevent them from gossiping with the eager implication and intricate detail of old fishwives. They would have scorned to comment on flower or wheeling butterfly.

The sheep poured on with their strange steady sound and the day climbed its noon. Then they came to the boundary.

'Are you goin' to count 'em, H. B.?' asked Buck, commanding his dog. 'Hold 'em oop steady, Boy...'

But Old H. B. was eager to press on, and after a rapid mental résumé of the opportunities presented his friend of stealing from him decided that they had been small during the time since Buck had taken over from Abel Crosset (whose count no man who knew him would trouble to question) and he said: 'H'I h'aren't goin' to bother. Put 'em through.'

Men and dogs pushed the sheep up and up, while the leaders stood in the open gateway and turned from it with horror to forge back into the mob, while others took their places to stare at the open gate — which of all things a sheep seems to find most horrifying.

The old ewes resisted strongly. Then one lost her footing owing to the pressure from behind, staggered, righted herself, and found, apparently to her amazement, that she was through the gate and living! She advanced a few steps tentatively, gathered courage, and, with a triumphant 'Baa,' ran on with little jumps over imaginary obstacles. The rest

poured after her, and in the confined space of the gateway, their backs tossed and flowed like foam in an angry river-bed, and the pattering of their feet and the vague bleating sound they made rose to a rushing sound like a coming hailstorm... And they flowed eagerly through the gate and fled on with little jumps ... And then the last lame sheep limped hurrying through, in piteous fear of being left... *And Tharlane was a sheep property — that ten years before had lain waste to the seasons!*

... Even after they crossed the boundary, the sheep had two hours' hard travelling before they reached their paddocks. And the old ewes were tired and very thirsty as the men worked them across country toward the Great Copi Tank, where once Big Harry had striven to retain his cooks, and where after the ewes had had their drink they might be turned out to wait their lambing.

When they were about half a mile from the tank, Old H. B. rode ahead, wishing to see his sheep have their first drink of Tharlane's water. The old man rode his horse up the white bank at a point where a tall box tree cast a little shade. A few ducks rose with a flurry of quick wings, and momentarily ruffled the dark opaque green water.

After the horse had finished drinking, man and beast were still in the fleckered shade.

The reflected light of the tank water beat up over the old tired horse (who looked, so Donald the Shearer had once said, as though he wondered why he had been chosen from all other horses to carry Old H. B.) and over the old man, who sat very straight, propped by the rotund amplitude of his

stomach against the pommel, his huge fists resting upon either portly knee, his neck drawn back into his shoulders so that it bulged in ponderous roll after roll of flesh, bronzed and glowing, set with short white bristles about the chin. His little eyes were impassive as an idol's, expressing neither the pugnacity nor cowardice, the dreams nor the fears of the man. His lower lip protruded a little beneath his white, tobacco-stained moustache, his cheeks bulged until they almost hid his eyes...

After about twenty minutes the sheep came wearily out onto the flat, too tired and thirsty to nibble at the sugar grass even. Listless and stiff and weary, they came slowly and unwillingly on among the trees: and then an old ewe in the lead threw up her head and sniffed, and another and another. The water was hidden from them by the high bank, but they had scented it!

A great pathetic bleat of gladness rose from the flock, and they began to gallop, the men trying to head them off from the water so that they might strike it on a long face instead of crowded up at the narrow end of the silt catch. But the little sheep swept past the horsemen like a tide at the flood — up the bank and down into the water! And before the first could drink they were forced out by those behind, and those by the ones that followed them.... In a minute the whole end of the silt catch was churned with swimming sheep, and the tide of newcomers had swept round the farther shore, thus cutting off those already in the water from any landing-place. Soon the swimmers began to flounder heavily as their fleece 'took water.'

Old H. B. turned purple and almost strangled with

rage at the bad management whereby Buck had allowed the mob to strike the dam at the end. Roaring profanely he urged his horse amongst the surging woolly backs, forcing the huddling, crowding, thirst-desperate ranks on along the bank.... After a few minutes' work the danger of drowning was past, and the whole length of both silt catch and main tank was fringed by drinking sheep.

The men dismounted stiffly and made a fire about the head of a fallen box tree.

Presently Old H. B., too, scrambled down and joined the group about the fire. It was warm and bright under the shelter of the white bank, and the old log blazed merrily. Each man unwrapped his little parcel of 'tucker,' and, as his quart pot boiled, he lifted it from the fire either by placing his hand above it and just touching the fingers about the rim, or by means of two sticks thrust in opposite ways through the looped wire handles at the side.

Between and over huge mouthfuls they talked; big boots powdering white dust, hairy elbows leaning upon logs, thick hands wielding knife and tin pint. There was much laughter as they 'yarned'; aimlessly telling the slow, often pointless anecdotes of bushmen... The day poured its glowing warmth over them...

At twilight, the master of Tharlane sat alone on the white bank of the dam. The pink died out of the eastern sky above the heavy silver brigalow trees, and still the sheep came and went in tentative groups or on solitary venturings.

Moonrise found Old H. B. still sitting there, a great grotesque figure, with the moon-silver lying over his bronzed flesh and silver hair.... A simple

owner of flocks and herds, and yet there was something exultant and brooding about him which suggested some old cockaded buccaneer on the bridge of his ship, listening with narrow-eyed complacence to the murmur of his slaves from the well-laden holds, while his sharp-prowed black ship cut through the tropic nights of a half-known world...

From all the surrounding bush came to Old H. B. the soft minute sounds of sheep. A new sound and mighty, which Tharlane had never heard before!

Then very slowly he turned homeward...

The old horse moved its feet deliberately and the sand crunched beneath them. As the moon rose higher, they moved down cold, silent ways of ebony and silver, tense with the expectation of some unguised mystery of night.... And all these things, the growing grasses and nibbling sheep, and the yarning by the little luncheon fires with his men, the eternal planning of the day's work, the vexations of the working even, were so many unfeeling sods burying the Little Man deeper under the dust of days and the commonplace of life — wherein it is hard to credit tragedies and easy to forget them!

The day's work — and the work of future days — that was the thing for him!

He felt that he could thumb his nose at fear (which had sat by him troublesomely in the nights) and at regret (which, now that he considered it, had not given him overmuch trouble as it was!).

When Old H. B. got home, he left the gate open, not because it was his habit, but because Mrs. Henrics had asked him to be sure and shut it lest rabbits enter.

He was not, as the Drover Abel had said, a lovable

man in his domestic relations. But great men before him have had their weaknesses, and there was that in him which, had he lived in the simpler age of sword and shield, or had he been born of a different people, might have set him wheezing at the last upon the throne of an emperor!

He could see visions and make of them reality; the power to do which makes men great: and has nothing whatever to do with the virtues.

He said heavily: 'Now as Donald the Shearer is back from th' North, 'e can do the kangaroo shootin' — *that makes th' last h'of them!*'

For all the men who had been in the bar-room so long ago would then have come to work for him!

XVI

Summer bathed the Deep Creek when Old H. B. arranged with Donald the Shearer to do the kangaroo shooting on Lower Tharlane. The gravel ridges where the old dead mulgas stood were hot with summer. There was warmth and sweet dryness to the roots of the grasses, fading to gold and amber and grey. The still water about the feet of the eight-foot reeds was warm, and there was summer in its tiny feathered forests of submerged waterweeds, where the silver-bubbled waterbeetles and fierce-faced dragonfly larvæ throve upon the innocent infancy of the tadpoles.

Reed warblers following their shy life-ways uptilted about the miranda stems; parrots, green and crimson, shrieked and winged between the box trees: there was fire-and-rainbow of blue kingfishers and poising sun-birds. The kangaroo families slept and played in the sparse shadow of the trees along the creek-banks, scratching out their forms between the surface roots. And in the evenings they drifted leisurely down to the water, moving upon hoppers and hands, and drank from the edge of a fading mirror which reflected them against black trees and rosy sky — drank softly with the sipping delicacy and hesitance of their kind... While their reflections became ghost-grey and then were lost in the summer night, and the water showed only the warm stars... And then the most conspicuous thing in all the dark was the orange and rosy flame of Donald's and Georgina's fire lighting the grey tree-trunks and the blue-white shape of the tent.

And every night, after he had been out to bank the fire with ashes and see to the dogs, Donald would come in very softly, and would perhaps look first at Georgina — asleep in the piled splendour of her hair — and then carry the tallow-dip across the canvas room and look down at the baby who was not his (which for all philosophy a man may find hard when he loves a maid)... The baby about whose naming they had not talked — asleep in the great simplicity of his nearly bald head and plump bare little brown tummy!

And then one night, as the large man looked down at the very small one, the latter woke, and gazed darkly round-eyed at the light, and then, seeing the large man, broke into the wickedest gummy smile that Donald had ever seen, including him in the vast joke of the light and the night and the kickableness of his own toes and their being together! It was a smile that could not be ignored.

Donald put down the rushlight on the sapling table, and kneeling by the cradle, said: 'Hullo, old chap.'

The baby's smile widened and widened. The joke was almost too big for him, and suddenly one pudgy smacking hand tossed up and grasped Donald's fair eyebrow.

Donald unclosed it and, taking the minute fist in his, whispered, 'Shake.' The baby shook all over in a delirious heaving of rapture. His mirth almost closed his eyes. 'It's nice that I'm here,' his whole manner announced: 'I'm nice, too.'

'Well, if so be it comes to that,' said the man, 'you *are*... But, you see, you've been sort of a knockout to me from the jump, lad, and I can't sort of welcome you. You aren't been much wanted, you know...'

The baby crowed with a surprisingly large sound, and seemed more secretly amused than ever.

'It warn't so blamed funny,' said Donald, with certain reproach, 'though you may thinks it was.' He rose to his feet, and, drawing the kangaroo fur up over the child, stepped back — bearing the light with him... The smile-dimplings slowly left the tiny fat face; the colossal joke was suddenly dissipated by crowding darkness and the man's going, and a baby's inescapable smallness... As Donald watched him he smiled once, a tentative smile asking response of an unsympathetic world and finding it not. Neither his smiles nor his kickings were apparently wanted! He had never before been wide awake enough to realize how vast the dark was. He clenched his hands, drew up his legs, went purple with the chameleon-like capacity of babies, shrieked, and was attacked by ignominious curdy hiccoughs.

'It do seem hard when a man was willin' to share his joke with any one,' said Donald. 'Steady, old man, you haren't got the digestion for sufferin'.' He lifted the firm minute thing from its cradle. Then settling himself beneath his own blankets, he tucked the baby in the curve of his arm, and with his free hand put out the light. He half expected renewed complaint, but in the dark he could feel minute tugs at his shirt button and hear faint peculiar sounds which told him that the joke was restored to all its pristine freshness.

Next morning he was up very early and, putting the still sleeping baby back in the hollow log cradle, he made no mention of the night's doings to the also sleeping Georgina.

But he thought that he had never heard the butcher-birds singing so loudly as they sang in the blue-dewed world as he added the potatoes and onions to the stew of young kangaroo meat which had been simmering on the banked fire all night.

Having fed the flame with some slow-burning logs, he carried up the day's water from the deep pool in the creek. Then, after packing his lunch of half a brown-crusted damper, a section of heavy jellied kangaroo tail, and some cold boiled onions, he took rifle, skinning-knife, and whetstone and set out down the creek for some early shooting.

The trees on one of the far hop ridges just caught the light of the sun, but the rest of the world was still pearly blue with dawn. Over the glassy reaches of the creek hung white smears of mist: odours were strangely strong on the damp air...

His first shot was at an 'old man' grey sitting on a gravel spit some seventy yards away. The animal was so still, and there were so many intervening reeds that the hunter could not at first be sure that he was not a weathered grey mulga stump. Then the old 'boomer' shook his ears, and made a slow deliberate step upon his hands. As he sank down he passed from Donald's sight altogether, but, hoping that he himself was also concealed from the animal, he ran swiftly and silently to a box tree some twenty yards closer, and, resting his rifle against the trunk, waited for his quarry to sit up again. The wait was a long one, for the 'old man' had begun to feed, and only the tips of his ears and a fraction of the upper curve of his back showed at varying intervals. Cocking the Winchester, the man whistled softly — the merest

breath of sound, but in an instant the kangaroo was upright, glancing interrogatively about for the source of the noise. The man's finger lay caressingly upon the trigger and his cheek to the stock, when from behind the reed screen two other heads lifted, and, from being a very easy shot, the moment's hunting became an interesting problem.

The hunter swung the rifle softly from the old man to the larger doe, steadied the fore sight against her heart, sank it exquisitely into the groove of the back sight, and fired! The doe leapt high into the air, recovered herself, and set off up the hillside, rising over the fallen timber as if winged, and then having gone some thirty yards, in the height of a flying bound, fell dead!... The man, however, was not watching her, but the other doe, who had leapt away at the sound of the report, and then paused irresolutely, ears quivering and little hands upheld much as a small dog holds them in begging. His hand was on the trigger again when from the doe's pinafore there popped the small bright head of a joey. Donald made no comment, neither sentimentalizing delay, but the rifle swung back from her to the old kangaroo, who was staring stupidly down the creek. A spine shot dropped his two-hundred-pound bulk at the shallow water edge, and, as the hunter ran up to put him out of his pain, the little doe whose maternity had saved her fled through the grey trees of the slope. He stood smiling for a moment at her unnecessary haste, then began to work upon his kill. The creek caught the gold reflections of sunlit reeds, whilst its mists melted against the hard blue sky... There was song everywhere now; the sweet-throated melody of the butcher-birds, the shriller note of magpies, the clamour of

crows, and little bubbling songs from the reeds: and still it seemed to him that he had never heard such singing, and he also hummed beneath his breath.

In the pauses of his working, Donald noticed a great cobweb hanging like a jewelled pattern between two dead trees, and an early eagle beginning his spiral flight above the sun... The whole world was scintillatingly bright: strangely scented. 'Adam must have had a sniff like this when th' world was new, friend!' said Donald to his rifle.

He skinned easily, wasting no effort, knowing to perfection where every cut was needed, where a gentle peeling would suffice, and where a sudden wrench was necessary. There was the definite pleasure of the fine craftsman in all his movements... When the two skins were in the bag across his shoulder, he ate his breakfast beside the creek and then struck away inland.

As the heat advanced, he varied his hunting tactics by standing very still in some tree shadow and searching the still golden fields of grass with his eyes; and at intervals his watching would be rewarded by the sight of an 'old man' wearied with the heat sitting up to breathe the cooler air above the grass-tops and lick his great forearms until they gleamed like wet rubber. When the animal lay down again, the man ran up noiselessly and was often able to shoot several of a family before they shook off the drowsiness of sleep and heat.

Sometimes he said to the rifle, 'Good shooting, friend!'

As the day rose to noon, the golden and grey grasses wavered in the hot air, and even the butter-

flies went to sleep on the grass-stems and the cattle slept in the tree shadows in little groups, so that the hunter alertly moving and killing, and the eagles droping out of the infinite heavens to devour the kills with which he had finished, seemed the only things awake and alert in the sunny bowl of the world... *And all day as he hunted there stayed with him the foolish memory of little sounds in the darkness indicative of the infinite continuance of the joke...*

Thus, when the gold evening light found him back on Deep Creek, where the big hollow box trees stood, he went more slowly amongst the fading lambs'-tails and native-clover, and his eyes were raised to the tree branches, and presently as he paused he saw one hurrying black speck and then another cross the blue heaven. So setting down his bag, heavy with its twenty skins, he began to cut his way in steps up the side of a great tree-trunk, and then, straddling out along a big limb thirty feet from the ground, began the precarious task of smoking and then cutting out one of its innumerable honey-laden hollows... As he worked he sang in spite of tiredness.

When he came into the camp in the red dusk, and the odour of roast kangaroo tail and onion and pumpkin came to him, he called: 'Georgie — I have got a great comb o' honey.'

And Georgina, fuller of curve and more darkly mysterious, rose from the fireside and came toward him. He held out the heavy log-length dripping its treasures, and spreading its subtle scent over all the other scents of the camp.

'Remember I told thee I'd bring it one day?'

'Yes,' said Georgina.

'Well, I've brought it...' he said and, laughing, kissed her full on the mouth, and then, crossing through the fire-glow, he touched a sticky finger to a small busy bald head '... for Little Donald.'

(And so, as it were, a man was christened with wild honey!)

Going back to Georgina, he said: 'Be thee happy wi' me, Georgie?'

She nodded slowly, her lips smiling at him, but a question remained in her eyes.

'What was wanting to ask thy Donald, then?'

'Something...'

'Ask it, then!'

'Some day... Not yet!... Some day.'

PART FIVE

XVII

On Tharlane, Old H. B. grew rich, and richer... He made money dealing, stock-breeding, from the sale of beef and wool. Men talked of 'H. B.'s luck'; but, although he was lucky — as Donald the Shearer said of him once — it 'takes brains to take luck, thee know — repellent as the idee be to most o' us!'

Things which were to become common practice of the land were first heard of as the madness of Old H. B. He was the first to propound the theory that on rough grassed land it was well at times to run sheep and cattle together, because, although the cattle might not fatten, they would come to a fattening age while running with sheep — when the animals could be separated to allow the beef to 'prime.' And during the time that flocks and herds ran together, the powerful creatures would cut pads for the weaker ones through the four- and five-foot grass. Men told of this bent backward and sideward with laughter: but Old H. B.'s ewes reared ever higher percentages of lambs as they trotted in and out along the cattle pads; percentages that had never been dreamed possible on such country as Tharlane.

He said, 'Sheep is worth more 'an fencing,' and erected about Tharlane a six-foot dog-fence with a barbed verandah, and men were sorry for him because no one had ever dreamed of dog-netting a great station, but only small farms and selections!

In answer Old H. B. said that, if you were using one square mile for a certain purpose and it paid you to keep dingoes off it, it must pay to keep them off a

thousand square miles devoted to the same use; and he lived to see the Government enforcing the dog-netting of sheep land.

He made good roads round every fence, saying that men's time was worth more than the 'economy' of bad roads; an incredible statement, for road-making had always been thought an extravagance.

When men said to him that this and that had never been done before, he said, rolling ponderously about his affairs:

'H'it were about time a man with brains 'appened h'along... a man like little Old H. B.!'

Even the fleshy tides of the encroaching cactus were, it seemed, safely stemmed by the patient, bowed strength of a woman. He had feared the 'pear' more almost than drought and fire and lack of water — it crept unsuspected as the filaments of cancer through the grass...here a fleshy, spiny leaf, here a purple fruit dropped by a bird... If the first traces of infestation could be found, all was well, but the search, search, search was the difficult thing! No hired help would do it thoroughly enough, and if it was not done, incredibly soon there was an odd patch of thorny leaves; a scattered grouping; a forest of cactus defiant of men. To Old H. B.'s astonishment, Sary was not merely keeping the lightly infested land clear; she was gaining on the main body of the pear where it came down from the abandoned lands to the north. He said of her: 'Who would 'a' believed it? She's 'oldin' th' blanky stuff!' But to her he said: 'Sary, h'I'm waitin' to see the day you'll 'ave y' selection clear — h'I put a lot h'a money in it, y' know.'

And smiling at him above weariness, she said: 'I'll try and get more done to show you this year, H. B. It

aren't that I'm ungrateful to you for givin' us a home!'

At memory of which he chuckled gutturally and said: 'Poor Sary — Goodness, just Goodness! That's what's the matter with 'er.'

All was superbly well with him.

The time came when, although Reason whispered, 'You have too much land already for an old man... a fat wheezing old man,' he thought how much nicer Tharlane would look on the map if it were not cut into a great set square by The Block; also Tharlane was growing docile to his hand...

Wherefore he dined one day before the great fireplace where the little pools had formed and boiled away again in so many rains.

'Shoo!' said Dorna Backs tranquilly to the gathered dogs, cats, fowls, and children. 'We've comp'ny.'

'What are you goin' to eat?' asked Old Backs of Old H. B., without either the geniality or encouragement which form so integral a part of hospitality. 'There's fowl an' stew an' not enough fowl as usual.'

'Stew, thank yer,' said his guest.

'No, you won't,' said Old Backs. 'You'll have fowl if I have to put it down your neck!' He rent the bird asunder with something of the brutality of the operators of The Wheel. 'Why,' he added, 'are you always an' forever hangin' about me wantin' to buy The Block when I haven't asked you to? When I never even spoke o' sellin' The Block?'

Old Backs was a smaller and more withered man than of yore, but his eye was still keen.

A living hen jumped onto the table by the remains of her sister. Old Backs poked her suddenly and

indelicately with the carving steel, so that she fell backward with a 'caaw' of violated feeling.

'Think! Yer gettin' h'old. This h'is h'a country of droughts h'an' prices h'is h'uncertain — *h'an' I'll give you five thousand cash for The Block!*' said Old H. B. '... Security means h'a lot to h'a man h'as 'e gets h'old.'

'Don't seem to mean much to you,' said Old Backs.

The boiled fowl was wilder of leg and more profuse of feather than even that which had formed the wedding feast of Donald and Georgina — for Mother Backs had been buried under the needlewoods on the flat two years before, and now, in so far as this office could be said to be performed on The Block, Dorna 'kept house.'

'*Cash*,' said Old H. B. softly — 'h'a nice little 'ome h'in town...'

'The Block's worth fifteen thousand,' said Old Backs.

Old H. B., who knew it to be worth twenty, looked down at his plate.

'Well, we've been neighbours these h'eighteen years...' he said (tactfully ignoring the fact that this nearness had been recorded in many stock losses despite even the excellence of his boundary riding).

'H'I'll split the difference h'at ten thousand!' he volunteered.

'Hum,' said Old Backs with an apparent awakening of interest. 'Ten thousand, did you say? — but The Block is a lovely compact bit of land.'

'... But pretty scrubby h'an' full o' burr!'

'There's sub-artesian water at five hundred feet all over it.'

'... An' h'of course h'it's terrible dog h'infested.'

'... It could carry thirty thousand sheep.'

'H'it would be h'over-capitalized afore yer really start.'

'Then what the hell do you want it for?' asked Old Backs, not illogically, and Old H. B., his eyes gleaming with an exultance he could not quite repress, ran on hastily: '... Still h'it would fill h'in Tharlane pretty well... shall we say ten thousand?'

'No, we won't,' said Old Backs, grinning malignly. '*Because I wouldn't sell for forty thousand!*'

This was unexpected. Old H. B.'s face darkened and his eyes almost closed. He lurched to his feet and leant forward over the table.

'You'll pay for this, Old Backs,' he said, gutturally menacing. 'You h'aren't paid fer many things in yer life — but this little joke's goin' to be h'a change.'

As he moved down the rotting verandah, he passed the door of Old Backs' room. He paused — for on the walls were many cheap colour prints of sprightly female faces...!

Next month the scandal of Old H. B.'s latest doing went up and down the land. He had brought out to Tharlane the fiery, flame-tongued, delectably fair barmaid from the New Hotel... Mrs. Henrics had gone weeping to stay with her aunt... Old H. B. had given the 'woman' clothes and jewels and a beautiful saddle-horse. Even Mrs. MacSpee, who for years had presided in Old H. B.'s kitchen, was threatening to leave, for, as she said, 'the mother of ten graves' could not be expected to endure 'unspeechable things without speaking.'

For two months the gleam of peroxided hair, flash of red lips, and the twinkle of jewelled shoe buckles

were to be seen about the Tharlane homestead, and then the unspeakable lady went riding on her thoroughbred horse and, getting lost, sheltered at the Old Backs Homestead. And next month men were laughing at Old H. B., more loudly even than they had laughed at his dog-fencing and road-making, for his guest transferred herself permanently, with her innumerable trunks and hat-boxes — to the Old Backs Homestead on The Block! Men meeting Old H. B. chaffed him about 'being cut out by a young 'un!' and he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

On his next trip the little Bush Brother, who struggled to see to the marryings and being born and dying of a parish so distressingly bigger than the British Isles, united in the Old Backs kitchen the most oddly assorted pair in his career.

Still later, Old H.B. kept a tryst on the Tharlane boundary and passed through the netting a bundle of five fifty-pound notes.

'It was worth more!' said the lady frankly. 'If I'd known within ten thousand or so how many cockroaches and fleas there were, I wouldn't 'ave done it!'

'When he sells to me fer five thousand, there's two thousand more fer yer,' said the old man. 'It's the 'ighest pay yer h'ever got in yer line h'of work.'

The woman looked at him curiously. 'You're lousy with land already an' you've about a foot and a 'alf in the grave,' she said pertly. 'Why do you want it?'

He looked at her bartered prettiness, and his little upturned moustache curled with scorn most unloverlike and, could she have seen it, quite reassuring to Mrs. Henrics. Then he smiled: 'There was h'a man called H'Alexander once...' said Old H. B.

'B-a-a-a!' said the girl, thinking that he made fun of her.

XVIII

On a warm morning of late spring, Old H. B. reined his horse beside Sandy's as the boy brought in the milking cows. For since Sandy Barwon was sixteen, he had been working for Old H. B. on Tharlane, and Sandy's blue eyes were worshipful as they gazed upon the jocund rolling bulk of his Deity, while with silent ardour of boyhood he worked for this man of magnificent proportions and accomplishments, until Old H. B. waited for him to burst his heart or break his back — reflecting regretfully that this would be rather a pity, as Sandy was such a splendid work machine!

To Sandy, Old H. B. was all of Glory and Adventure and Hero-stuff ardency of youth might demand ... Who could track as he? Following a trail, now by a grazed anthill, now a crushed tussock, now the breath of an impression on the dust!

For all to see, had he not taken up, and used, and grown rich from, land that all other men feared to touch?... *And if men spoke evil of him they lied!*

'You go h'and catch 'im fer me,' said Old H. B. 'I h'aint the time h'and the trappers h'aint the 'ead-piece.'

Sandy's young face flamed to a bright red with his excitement.

'The mad dog?' he questioned. 'Can I go after him, Boss? Oh, can I?' His boy's hands trembled on the reins and he pulled his wide hat farther over his eyes as they rode slowly through the gold dust raised by the cows.

'Does y' mean it?' he asked, his eyes bright as the sky, glowing in his plain freckled face.

'Huh,' grunted the old man. 'Take yer time, h'an' get yer dog, h'an' don't let me see yer till yer 'ave — then there's fifty pounds waitin' fer his scalp!'

From his point of view, this was modest payment, for the dog had been a blight upon the shining vision of his land for some two months past — but to Sandy it was fortune!

Old H. B. had seen the crazed creature first in the early spring as on a still evening he rode through the most desolate part of the run, some forty miles from the homestead. He had been tired, and angered by an unexplained loss of sheep... and quite suddenly he thought, against his will, of the Little Man wearing his life away in prison.

... A weak and foolish thought...

He had ridden slowly along the wide tree-set bed of the Black Ant Creek, where there were little rain-filled pools through the fresh tall green grass, from which ducks broke almost under his horse's nose.

All about the water-course were scattered the pale candles of the white spider lilies. Grey rabbits scurried for cover...

Sadness of the infinities of loneliness, that was very close akin to fear, walked with Old H. B. through the still lilac hour. Those secret cowardices, that few dreamed he had, rose to leer at him.

It was then that the harsh growling of the Devil, his dog, caught at his consciousness and completely transmuted his melancholy into uneasiness!

He halted the horse and looked whither Devil looked.

And there came down along the water-course a

great red dingo running swiftly, its head held rather low, its eyes glazed... a thing *unlike* — apart — horrible!

There is no rabies in Australia. Old H. B. had never seen a dog such as this...

For the moment he had been unnerved. It seemed to him that this, perhaps, was some avenging ghost of his turbulent past come back to follow him! The spirit of the Little Man, prison dead, perhaps? Mad Ezric Strathmore for whom he had — 'cared' so solicitously?... A part of the unknown — that lurked just beyond the dark fringes of life!

The dingo ran fast with slavering mouth red-tongueing, and fixed unseeing eyes! At times it champed at a passing stick. It came straight toward him, and for the first time in a valiant history, his dog Devil cowered hunched and bristling against the legs of his passive horse.

It came fast, looking neither to the right nor the left, and now they could see its fixed, shining yellow eyes, and the foam slather of its mouth and the long, lithe movement of its muscles, and it passed them, apparently unseeing, and went on down the watercourse toward the darkening east...

At least it appeared to be a thing of flesh and blood!

Old H. B. had wiped his wet forehead with trembling hand. It was just a mad dog! But he had never seen a mad dog before, and even although he did not for a moment suppose that the big dingo had hydrophobia, but was, whatever the reason, just 'plain mad,' well, it had been none the less horrible! All his peasant ancestors, who had fled before the cry of 'Mad wolf,' woke and shuddered in him; all his own partic-

ular idiosyncrasies of terror! His depths of superstitious dread... the more humiliating in that half of his nature despised superstition!

He had known that it was only a dog...

But he had cut across some miles of timber in order that he need not follow the thing's trail up the shadowed creek...

At home again he sent for a professional trapper to hunt the crazed marauder... But one wizened hunter and then another learned of the dog's habits, and — went away.

Hence Old H. B.'s talk with Sandy...

Sandy's face aged, hardened, as will always the face of a man who lives for one thing and one thing only from out of all the things that make the world. He did not hear when next the old man spoke to him, and the huge pendulous stomach of the man shook with suppressed laughter.

He said, 'Aren't yer scairt?' But Sandy only shook his head and gripped his horse with his knees until it danced.

Next morning the boy set out for the Lower Run before it was light, riding a slow old horse and leading two others with his equipment of traps and guns... He felt instead of saw the changes of the road, now sand, now baked clay.

Sometimes invisible wings passed between him and the great pall of stars; sometimes he broke through the fine sticky silk of a giant spider's web stretching across the road from tree to tree.

To himself he repeated: 'Er course I aren't afraid! ... An' I'll get 'im for *'im!*'

That night he camped at Gundies Dam on the Upper Black Ant Creek, and the next day began his hunting...

The days flowed...

The wild lilies burnt away their pale flower candles beside the water-courses and where their flowers had been were hung round green seed heads; the rain-daisies withered, and the wild ducks left the drying pools, but still Sandy followed the signs of his great dog. Followed with savage happiness, and pricking fear, and aching anxiety — yet certain of the ultimate end... Unless Old H. B. grew weary of his slowness and sent him away! At this fear he actually clenched his hands; which, for all their great freckled strength, were only the eager hands of a boy. Praying, 'Lemme get him fer you, H. B.!'

After the first week he had begun to feel that he had always known the dog. He knew where he ran at dusk and dawn, where he bit an animal when he killed, learned that sometimes he wearied of the slow, meek sheep and matched strength with some old kangaroo... Learned also how, unlike any of his kind that Sandy had heard of, he ran howling under the sun at noon, driven by the strange madness in his brain — and that at such times he was reckless... like a thing mad with sorrow... *a lost, left thing!*

And on each and every day the boy made the sunny world the more dangerous for the dog, even if it was only by the addition of a steel-jawed trap to a creek-floor, or a copper thread glinting across a pad — the touch nerve of a hidden gun!

And yet always his morning rounds held only disappointment.

He caught nothing more important than an occasional kangaroo, a fox, a crow or so, and once a piteous sheep!

He said, 'Think o' all that money!' Then, being a

little ashamed of the mercenary thought, 'An' I gotta get him fer H. B.'

And still the dog killed at his pleasure, thirty and forty sheep a night when the mood was on him. And on quiet nights Sandy thrilled to the far sound of his howling...

First a faint note at the very edge of sound, away to the south, and then repeated at intervals, growing steadily clearer as the dog came down to the creek a mile or more below the boy's camp, and then a slow dying away to the east... There was infinite melancholy and certain deep-mouthed menace in the sound of it, and to Sandy it held, over all now, challenge!

In the dawn he would find along which pad the dog had come, and if the next night were moonlit he would lie beside it, his gun resting across some fallen log; every nerve alert. But always it seemed that the dog knew of it — and came down some other trail!

Once he heard the wailing, very close, at high-sun, and Sandy's hair prickled along his nape... for no dingo should howl at noon...! But he was working for Old H. B. — and he was going to get the dog!

And every day he made the country about the Black Ant Creek and the Hop Ranges more dangerous for the dog... And, indeed, although at night he might have to say, ''Course I aren't scared — I gotta get 'im for 'im!' he was very happy in his hunting, in spite of both fear and longing.

... The summer attained its white climax, and then the year waned through the blue loveliness of autumn weather. All the grasses came to seed; so that to look away across the tasselled weaving was like looking at a great brocaded tapestry of many

colours... The red and blue kangaroos put on their winter velvet.

Sandy saw all these things and took from them a vast half-shy, wholly possessive, happiness.

In the chill evening, as the night wind began to move in the dark trees of the creek, he bent to his fire with a strange thrill of delight; or followed with his eyes the ascent of frail rose-and-silver wood-smoke toward the white wintering stars.

Of the dingo he said: 'You carn't beat me much longer, Boy!' And at night he ran over, as a rosary, the details of his hunting: of traps and snares and guns.

The pageant of the wild was his...

He had seen the burnished herons mate. Had watched the fussy housekeeping of the parrots...

Riding through a belt of dead, dry-rotting mulga, old and gaunt, he had come upon two old men kangaroos fighting. Two old rough-furred greys, savage and powerful. The bigger of the two standing a full six feet as he sat on his hocks, eight feet when he rose onto thick-arched tail and strong toes.

Their arms were like the forearms of a man and the great barrels of their ribs and trunks flowed into the great thighs with the sweep of a superb strength. The younger animal was the smaller by a head or two, but also more supple, and full of fire and grit.

They faced each other with arms locked about straining shoulders, much as a pair of wrestlers might face each other; muscles surging, their strong-clawed hands tore fluff as they slipped and gripped again. Grunts were rent from furred chests, and hoarse breaths from their nostrils: their treading, thumping feet could be plainly heard in the stillness of the bush, and the hot animal reek of their bodies came to

Sandy. Each one strove to prevent his opponent from lifting from the ground his hind leg with its ripping-claw, and at the same time to plant his own in the thick-furred stomach before him, and then drive it down with the rip of a scythe. A dog or man coming into that embrace had been disembowelled in a flash, but the 'old men's' skin was amongst the best leather in the world and the muscles of their bellies taut as the face of a drum, and, although time and again, as they writhed and heaved and locked and pushed and ripped, Sandy expected to see them fall in their gore, the fight seemed likely to go on indefinitely.

At intervals they unclasped as though by mutual consent and sat facing each other with heaving chests, while they licked their forearms and shoulders until they gleamed like wet rubber, then, the cooling process completed, they closed again with the rapidity of trained boxers.

They doubled and twisted sideward seeking advantage of kicking room; they rose high on their toes and tails and bent each other now this way, and now that, and back until their trunks formed shifting, rippling crescents; and at last the lighter 'roo was gradually overborne... As his adversary weakened, the giant old man forced him farther out of the safety of the lock, and, getting his reaping-hook foot into play on the softer flesh of the upper chest, began to draw spreading crimson stains. The lighter fellow was still game, coming again after the rests with little grunts of rage, but he was obviously beaten.

Neither of them had seen the watching boy, although he had moved up until he was looking through the fork of a mulga not twenty yards away.

For the two fierce, fight-drunken old males there

were only themselves in all the world... Sandy sighed, remembering duty, for he would like to have seen the end of the fight, and his throat was tight with the excitement of it. But he was working for Old H. B. and he raised the rifle, and, steadying it against the tree-trunk, drew a fine bead on the heart of the biggest 'roo.

There was the spitting crash of the 'Savage': the great animal bounded high into the air, and backward, coming down with a mighty crash into the fine-twigged head of a dead mulga.

Sandy had expected the other to turn and bolt, and had him covered for a flying shot, but the drunkenness of battle was still upon him and he seemed actually deaf to the noise of the shot.

Reeling with weakness, he gazed stupefied at the twitching body of his late opponent lying in the mulga-head. Then, apparently deciding that, in some manner unexplained, his own valour was responsible for the other's death, he rose to his full height and, swinging his arms slightly out from his sides as a bellicose man does, he snickered defiance at the world!

It was, Sandy thought as he shot him, a good way to die, in the glow of unexpected victory, 'just as you'd thought you was licked — and won!' And yet he felt a bit mean — after he had so enjoyed their fight! One body he poisoned as a carcass for eagles, and from the other made a sack full of plump, dog-tempting baits... For it was his duty to Old H. B. to rid Tharlane of the dingo by poison or any other means that presented themselves — although if he poisoned the dog he would probably never know it — never have the reward!

And, over all was the thrill and hunger of his hunting: and the growing chafing at delay... alternating with hours of certainty, when it seemed to him, thinking of the death-sown bush, that each night must bring the dog to him — and yet toward dawn he heard always the far, desolate, triumphant note of his howling as he went up into the hop hills.

At first the boy had feared that his presence and the many undisguisable signs of his activity would frighten the dog away, but the dingo showed no signs of changing his hunting grounds, in which tenacity, as in his wailings under the sun, he showed the recklessness of his madness.

Yet he was, Sandy decided, clever if mad, but that he had spells of utter madness he did not doubt, for no right-minded dog ran howling at midday, blind and indifferent to all things, as at times the red dog ran, like a thing left behind, almost... mad with sorrow!

Yet he could not be caught!

When sometimes late at night Sandy heard the wild swans passing against the stars, it seemed that they cried, 'Hurry! Hurry!'

Hurry, but how?

In spite of the prickling in his nape, he almost prayed that some such chance as that which Old H. B. had had be given to him!

Then, in an early dawn, it came.

He had been following a little creek which he had never seen before, where the water-smoothed, red rocks still showed the traces of native axe-grinding, while on the cave-roofs of the water-eaten sandstone banks still showed the smoke-stains of the vanished native fires, and the cave floors were worn by generations of now vanished brown feet. On the rock walls

were the faintly stencilled outlines of native hands... When he had time he meant to come back and rake in the rubbish of the little caves and in the deep pools of the creek... *when red dog was dead!*

Now he rode on up the little, hidden creek toward the hop hills, and, breaking through a screen of vivid green Peruvian trees which rose from the creek-floor itself, he looked into a wide bay of sand and rocky pools, with little threads of water creeping from them across the already warm rocks, and knew that he had found a group of the rare natural springs.

Beyond rose a steep bluff of ruddy rock, patched with sparse pale grass and dark green hop bushes, and along the brow a blue-grey surf of old mulga.

As he looked there was a flash of amber in the sun among the mulga, then out onto the red rocks came the big dingo, his coat gleaming orange and brilliant in the early light!

The dog came forward onto the topmost rock, and Sandy, with heart pounding and contracted throat, backed his horse into the Peruvian bushes while it seemed to him that its hoofs clattered like a regiment of cavalry! The dog sat on the crest of the bluff, presenting his chest to the sunrise and then, lifting his muzzle to the sky, he howled and howled again, on a long single note, indefinitely sustained...

Sandy slipped from the saddle and rested his rifle through the fork of a smooth-barked Peruvian tree, and then, kneeling, tilted the rifle slowly, until the sights lay fairly on the big dog's chest. It was a clear shot of not more than a hundred yards, but the flicker of the leaf shadows played confusingly over the sights, and Sandy's hands trembled so that he dared not fire. He thought: 'If that was a 'roo, I'd

shoot him and never give it a thought... If I keep the sights on him, I *must* get him... He'll go if I can't shoot...' And he tried to force his hands to steadiness, and then tried to pretend that the dog was only a red kangaroo... And then, because he dared not wait, he drew a deep breath and slowly closed his trigger-finger. But just as he fired, he knew that he gave a little nervous jerk!

The dog spun sideways with a sudden backward plunge and came down on its flank, and Sandy choked with wild gladness; and then felt hot childish tears in his eyes and began to run with great scrambling, reckless leaps toward the foot of the little bluff... The longing to chant his exultation rose in his throat.

Where the old trappers had failed, he had succeeded!

Suddenly he saw that the dog was up again, and also that he had got himself so close under the bluff that a second shot was almost impossible, only a line of the red back and swaying shoulders being visible above the rock edge. He fired from the shoulder at this narrow mark and heard the bullet go whining away from the stone, while the dog vanished...

With his rifle over his shoulder, Sandy ran at the bluff, and, scrambling and clutching at the wild hop bushes, struggled his way up, panting for his first vision of the dog, which he never doubted was now his. Oh! He would trail it if he trailed forever! It was hard hit and it would be his! He would put the skin into Old H. B.'s hands, saying, 'Here he are, Boss!'

He neared the cliff top: another yard and he might see his quarry, perhaps already dead! He grasped a mulga root; blind with victory as the great kangaroo had been deaf with battle, swung his weight on it, felt its age-rotted wood splinter in his hand, felt the tus-

socks give way below his clutching feet, and then the long sailing drop...

It happened that next day Old H. B. called at Sandy's camp to make caustic comment on the slowness of hunting, and then, not from any concern for Sandy's safety, but because he had nothing particular to do and wanted to see if his 'eye' was what it had been, he set out down the yesterday morning's trail of Sandy's horse.

He had some small trouble in the false kangaroo grass, but finally came out on the bank of the little creek. And so he, too, rode leisurely along its bed, and came at length to the little caves and the Peruvian bushes and the tethered horse — also to Sandy lying broken and delirious at the foot of the cliff.

The old man did not dismount at once, as, for a man of his weight, this was not an act to be undertaken lightly, and he satisfied himself from the saddle that there was 'plenty of life' in the softly moaning Sandy.

After regarding the boy for some seconds with the snorting contempt which he felt for most victims of accident (which, he was wont to say, was generally another name for 'gettin' what you asked for'), he sat breathing heavily and trying to reconstruct the particular form of request on Sandy's part which had led to this particular fulfilment.

Trailing his skilfully looped whiplash, he pulled up Sandy's discarded rifle — two shells were missing from the magazine... there was one of them empty and unejected in the barrel. Old H. B. looked up at the cliff-top with sudden comprehension.

Then with muttered grumblings he prepared to get

Sandy onto the horse and carry him to the fencing camp twenty miles away to the east.

It was high noon of the next day before he could return, and, after a perilous quarter of a mile détour, came out on the top of the little bluff, where, in blood and hair and dust-page, was written the story which already he suspected.

Then he set out to follow the trail of the wounded dog... riding up, and ever up, through tangles of false wattle, winter-crimsoned hop bush, and old mulga. Sometimes following with his horse at a steady, plodding walk. Sometimes halted for an hour where the trail was lost on a purpled stretch of ironstone...

Mid-afternoon came, and the traces of dried blood were thicker on the trail, and he came more often to those places where the dog had fallen and scratched up the earth in its efforts to rise... Then — at the foot of a bald red bluff, rising austere and violent against the fathomlessly blue sky — he lost the trail.

At last, raising his glance from the ground, he looked up at the rock-crown some two hundred feet above, and there humped, forward, with raised wing-shoulders gilt by the afternoon light, sat an eagle!

As the man's hand fell to his rifle, the giant bird spread its great wings and rose with heavy strokes into the air.

Another and another followed it!

Their wings cut a superb pattern on the sky, their burnished necks curved in cruel grace to their savage beaks... They wheeled and passed and interpassed, ever ascending, although, once free of the peak, their wings were motionless save for the changing angles of the vibrantly stretched feathers...

Old H. B. climbed off his horse and, waddling

round the base of the bluff, came to a crannied valley, cleaving the rock from base to crown. After a moment he began perilously to ascend... Trying every foot- and hand-hold, grunting with explosive breaths.

At last, snorting and sweating, he stood upon the top. Tharlane lay beneath him, and the coveted Block; miles away, through powderings of gold air he could see the gleam of the swamps on Arteran's Land.

Sable and silver, lilac and gold, tapestried with tree-tops — receding, receding, becoming swooning veils of colour, mists of silver, infinities of gold — lay the earth. Gold to the west, deeply, wonderfully blue above and to the east, hung the vast basin of the sky: cloudless, motionless, embracing him and yet remote beyond imagining. The beginning of space... The doorways of eternity! Against it, now dark, now gold, the ascending eagles... Creatures surely of the limitless air, untethered to the earth by any tie! Part of the eternities of light, the spaces of ether — that dwarfed even his great lands... And yet he knew that he would not have been gone an hour when they would be back plucking at the tattered feast of a dead dog stretched upon a rock... And they would stay there picking and feasting, and trotting, with the unlovely gait of a walking eagle, about the meatless bones, until hunger drove them out again to hunt — in defiance of laziness and cowardice...!

Beyond the half-eaten body of the dog lay the clean-picked skeleton of a man stretched in strange bony semblance of weariness and sleep! The small, low-skulled, big-toothed skeleton of an aborigine!

Near a fleshless hand lay a small boomerang, a little blue stone axe, and a painted nulla-nulla.

But about the bony limbs still hung rags of clothing, and from them had fallen a small rusted knife and an empty tobacco tin...

Old H.B., who in the early days of Queensland settlement had seen many aboriginal skeletons, male and female, large and very little, lying where 'justice' had been dealt, judged this to be the skeleton of a very old man: an 'old buck,' doubtless, who had crept back to die in some place known in a childhood before the white man came... In the bones, the native implements, in the incongruous rags of another civilization: in the grief-madness and last return of the dying dog to the long dead man, was written surely an epilogue of The People Dispossessed.

Old H.B. snorted in boundless relief; the strangely mad thing that had troubled him had become merely part of a tragic poem of the land he loved!

No dark fingers of the uncomprehended had plucked at him! Here was a tale that he was pre-eminently fitted to understand!

He had been trained in fierce contempt for the black man, and yet — and yet — it seemed to him 'rather bloody rough' that, in the width of these hop hills and deep creeks and sun-flooded grasslands, there was left of the Dark People only the stains of smoke and the shadows of traced hands on the cave-walls... and picked bones on a rock!

He saw the white man's flocks spreading out and out across the face of the Commonwealth, nibbling riches from the wilderness; saw a new nation drawing wealth from these flocks and from the corn and wheat that followed the spreading of the flocks... And he saw also the people who had stood still so long (because in their sunny march of nomadic days there

was no need for them to advance), saw them suddenly inundated by this other people, with virtues and vices and arts, a million years ahead of the little blue stone axe... And he saw the white tide of the new people trampling, driving, creating, hewing out a new world wherein there was no room for the soft-eyed Dark Folk, a new swift world in which they could not learn to live, and he saw them forced northward and westward ever to the desert and the fringes of the Gulf — beyond which was the sea...!

There was no help for it, and Blacks were dirty beggars of small account, thought Old H.B. And yet, because he, too, so loved the little creeks with their worn floors and the varied grass and the great blue weather, he was sorry for the people for whom these things were no more — who had been driven from them by the rifles, whips, and laws of the white man...

Old H. B. looked down at the bones, and then removed his hat. The sun — a ball of gold — touched the far blue lip of the world. A half thought of giving the remains burial came to the old man. Then he looked across the miles of blue tenderness that was the earth to the last gold spark of the vanishing sun, and thought it sacrilege to blind even dead eyes with dust.

'Sleep well, brother,' said Old H. B., speaking half in reverence, half in irony, '... sleep quiet! H'it's h'all we've left yer!' (Speaking thus a people's epilogue as it was written on the eagles' rock! An epilogue of tragedy to which he was not insensitive... because it was of his land!)

Then he came down from the high places prepared to defraud!

He was still prepared to, when, a few weeks later, Sandy, rather white of face and badly limping, asked, 'Did I get him, Boss?'

Fifty pounds meant a new tank for the Number Seventeen Bore — and Sandy would not be fit for work again for a long time, so Old H.B. judged; wherefore he was useless to Tharlane and need not be humoured. ('I have,' Mrs. Henrics had once written to her aunt, 'sometimes thought with regret that gratitude for service is not a large part of my dear husband's character'; adding, with a flare of insight, 'Yet, dear aunt, he is a man of surprising contradictiveness. I have several times known him do something quite nice, as it were.' The episode of the mad dog admirably demonstrated both these traits.)

'No one found th' co'pse,' said Old H. B. 'No one but you, Sandy, seen th' h'animal in 'is blood.'

(And now he spoke the epilogue of love!) Sandy looked long at him, then turned away...

Thereafter, when men spoke evil of the old man of Tharlane, Sandy was silent... Later, he went shearing and kept a 'two-up' gambling school, known as 'Gutters'.'

When the little Bush Brother, who had always been interested in him, said that this was dishonest, Sandy said: 'Every one are!' and offered the gentle cleric a pint of overproof rum, and, when he declined, drank it himself in a gulp that was as startling to behold as it doubtless was to the digestion.

Then, as unintelligible explanation, he said:

'I *knows* I got him... see? I knows he seen him...'

XIX

Even the greatest executives have their reverses!

Old H. B. encountered several at the time that the second selections were taken from Tharlane.

'If you send me to gaol, I'll have you arrested for dummying!' cried Mrs. Henrics, her lips trembling until she could hardly speak, and, as always, slightly mixed: 'But I've done nothing sinful and you can't hurt me! You let the cow eat my pink carnation given me by dear Aunt herself with the little red frill that the grubs used to like so, and she is the kindest woman! And when I came out in the morning there she was just eating up the last of the lovely bush (the cow, not Aunt...) *And you can kill me, but it's my selection!*'

Old H. B. reflected that the choosing of a 'dummy' for land which a man could not legally hold in his own name was a work requiring such nice discrimination that even the most able must at times err. The perfect dummy had to be stupid enough to be in necessitous or dependent circumstances, but sufficiently intelligent to carry out his (or her) part of apparent owner with a skill to deceive the official eye. The dummy must be dishonest enough to perform the necessary false swearing and yet sufficiently honest to stand by the illegal contract with the man who is the secret owner of the land dummied... Most men tried their wives, but in Old H. B.'s case it had not been successful! Once out of the family circle, the element of chance was even increased.

Five selections for closer settlement had been re-

sumed from Tharlane — Old H. B. had been unable to let them go without struggle!

Reviewing possible dummies for the beautiful North-East Paddock, he had finally decided upon Luther Barwon the Teamster. The giant was untroubled by niceties of conduct, he was always penurious, he would stand by any transaction involving the element of honour amongst thieves — and yet H. B. was troubled over him.

Luther had drawn his block and been installed thereon. But now, simultaneously with the revolt of Mrs. Henrics, the more or less inevitable inquiry had come.

Old H. B. spent a large part of the night before the trial with the principal suspect. Driving Luther into a corner, he impressed him with his recital for the cross-examining magistrate — until Luther's real eye was almost as wild and distracted as his glass one.

'Now, 'ave yer got h'it?' asked Old H. B. as the clock struck a quarter to midnight. 'Yer'd managed to make a thousand out h'of contracts — yer bein' h'a man h'as saved successful — yer'd won h'a little h'at the races — h'and yer great h'aunt gave yer h'a windfall h'afore 'er death!'

'Yes,' said Luther, with a look so nearly intelligent that a lesser man than H. B. had been deceived by it — 'Yes, I've got it real plain, and clear as a bell! You needn't tell me no more, I know...' His voice boomed its relief over the sleeping town.

'Hush, yer h'old blank!' snarled his instructor.

'Right you are, H. B.!' shouted Luther, the hope that his lesson was ended flushing his large scarred face. 'You needn't 'ave no fears, I know me part like a pome, I do.'

Next day his confidence had waned, however, and like a gigantic mild and terrified ox they had led him to the sacrifice.

For a while everything went well with him.

In reply to the question: 'Did you take up this land for your own personal benefit and advantage?'

Luther replied, as he should have: 'I did.'

At the next: 'Was the necessary capital provided entirely by you?' he wavered not: 'It were,' said Luther; and encouraged by his success he added conversationally: 'You see, I was down on me luck at the time an' I thought as I might turn a bit o' money on the land.' He looked short-sightedly across the court to see whether Old H. B. approved his progress.

'I see,' said the lawyer. 'You were out of funds, so you invested the necessary two thousand pounds in this property in the hope of improving your position.'

'I did,' said Luther. 'I always had a sort of idea to go on the land, but never having had the money I weren't able to afore.'

The lawyer looked reminiscent: 'Many of the best men we have are kept off the land by lack of funds, industrious men of great ability, who, through no fault of their own, yet lack the necessary capital ——'

'I object, your worship,' cried the defending lawyer. But Luther's heart was warming to the understanding attitude of the opposing counsel.

'It's very true, young man,' said Luther excitedly. 'A man can work like a bullick an' save like a bower bird an' still never get ahead o' himself.'

'Indeed,' said the lawyer brightly. 'And you have experienced that difficulty yourself, Mr. Barwon? Would it be impertinent to ask what the largest

amount of your savings at any one particular time has been?'

'Objection!' cried counsel for the defence, but the objection was not upheld.

'I never were a man to make a show as I weren't entitled to,' said Luther, reassuring his lawyer. 'I don't mind telling you that I never had more than twenty pounds — do what I would.' His ancient eye was reminiscent.

'*Never?*'

Luther's mouth opened and then remained open and inarticulate. He saw too late the abyss before him: he was stricken and pitiable. He looked about him for help — but none was forthcoming.

'Then how did you have the two thousand pounds necessary to take up the land, Mr. Barwon?'

He obviously strove to remember. He strove until the sweat rose on his seamed forehead, but the transition from agreeable reminiscence to fictitious enrichment was too sudden.

'Me selection money?' said Luther weakly, trying for time.

'The witness must answer the question,' said the magistrate.

Luther's great heart failed him; he turned to the court, his one eye seeking wildly for Old H. B., detected him, and cried:

''Ow *did* I get that money, Heach B.?'

After this even the defending counsel lost interest in the case. Old H. B. was obliged to forfeit the North-East Block (without compensation for his improvements) and only escaped the forfeiture of his main leases by 'a personal interview' whose costliness depressed him for many days.

The selection was reopened and drawn by one of the sons of Old Mr. Elgin, commonly called 'Old Earwig,' and of whom the men of the West said that he was 'that mean he tried to charge a ant agistment for settin' in his shadow.'

Old Earwig himself drew the East Block, his son Adam the North Paddock, and Sandy Barwon, alias Gutter, the Bullock Paddock — the poorest of the five blocks, and which adjoined Sary's selection.

Sandy had gone to the drawing, big, swanking, debonair. He had danced and drunk away the night before and waked with a fierce headache: still, after washing his face and putting on a tie with purple spots, his hands were steady enough, and they did not even tremble when he heard his name read out as the holder of the Bullock Paddock — for five years had passed since Sandy had shot the red dingo, and Sandy was now a 'bloke'; a man's man, and tough!

And yet his hand closed hotly about the notification of ownership!

While he was still very young, in years if not in muscle and bone, he had learned, through grace of strength in his chest and arms and stomach, in strong legs and deft hands, to outdrink and outfight and outlove other men. His hair was scented. His walk rolling. Great was the bagginess of his trousers; and fashionable the lowness of their precarious hitch about his strong slim loins.

He had no definite realization that it was perhaps a better thing to build a fence than to keep upright upon his feet while the poison of Old Murgers' liquor burned through a protesting brain. But he was happy as later he inspected his selection; pleased by the thought of coming labour with the earth.

He was happy and therefore very good to look upon, as he rode through his freshly acquired paddocks, and his hair curled about his head like a calf's; pale gold hair, gleaming in the sunlight when he raised his hat to the breeze. To the vastnesses of sunlight and the dry earth!

By mid-morning of his first day on his property he was riding over a low open hill shoulder covered with short grey never-fail grass and saw two stately bustards stalking magnificently across it. Sandy's hand dropped to his rifle; then he hesitated.

'I won't shoot none of my turkeys to-day,' he said. The great birds watched him out of beautiful stupid golden eyes as he rode on over the grey hill shoulder, the sun gleaming on his big bay horse and on his shining curls.

The day might have been such a one as that upon which Donald the Shearer had found the troubled dingo mother so many years before. Again the purple armadas of the clouds sailed through the great white sunrays and their shadows walked the earth...

Now the big bay horse pushed its way through breast-high kangaroo grass... and a scent as of drying hay tickled Sandy's nostrils and innumerable grasshoppers flickered away before the slowly advancing horse. As he rode, Sandy plucked the pale yellow grass-stems and chewed the sweet juicy sections just above the joints.

He had a sense of the goodness of life — if a guy was tough enough!

He was happy! Happy!

At noon he ate beneath some stunted gidya trees on a little plain so fiercely ablaze with light that the sky seemed almost dark by contrast.

After his meal Sandy stretched himself on his face at full length in the sun. The bleached plain closed in upon him. A world of faded grass and burr, where crickets sang. The heat of the earth was almost too great to bear, and yet, pulling his hat down so that it shaded his neck, he sprawled relaxed... Heat above — below: calling of crickets and dry whispering short grass all about. His cheek burned to the living glow of the hot ground, the withered sweet grass leaves touched his lips.

He was happy as he had never been — and then suddenly the happiness had become pain!

He was startled, shaken, until he realized that the pain was merely his happiness grown too poignant — a little different. He needed some one to tell of it, and, mounting again, turned his horse in the direction of the great stock route which separated his land from Sary Strathmore's... He wanted some one to 'brag' to, some one to eat with by a mutual fire — he no longer felt satisfied by, as though he were a part of, the land, but a human thing in contest with it! Wanting other humans to tell of the contest; of what he was going to do!

A ten-mile ride brought him to Sary's small slab-walled house amongst its lopped box trees and clean-swept netting yards.

Sary was shooting topknot pigeons gorged with stolen fowl wheat. The plump bodies of the slain lay in a heap by the meat-block, exposing their round lilac-tinged breasts.

As Sandy watched, Sary raised her gun to another pigeon hurtling on whirring wings across the clearing — and dropped him with a surprising loud thump for so small a bird. Her worn face reflected her satisfac-

tion in the shot, as with bowed shoulders and long stride, she made toward her prize.

'Do you ever shoot sitting, Miss Sary?' asked Sandy, who had come up unnoticed. Sary was not familiar with the niceties of sport.

'No, I generally stands for pigeons, Sandy,' she said kindly. 'Arter crows I sometimes has to crawl on me stomic.' She picked up her birds and counted them: 'Twelve — they make a great stew, with onion rings just browned in the pan afore they go into the pot — and a sprinkle of herbs... If you could stay the night, now, we'd have a pigeon supper.' She looked into his face, eagerly, shyly, trying to buy his company with promised dainties... 'I got a blackberry dumpling in the pot, too.'

He said: 'I was hoping you'd ask me. Can I help pluck the pigeons?'

Sary settled herself on the step, Sandy on the hard clean-swept red earth. She stood the tin for the feathers between them... the dead birds' lovely red-gold eyes gleamed brightly; rosy legs and beaks twisted in and out of view as the pluckers turned the fat small bodies; little pearly feathers flew.

'I wish I didn't have to shoot them,' said Sary. 'When I first come here, I wasn't never going to shoot none of the birds — but the topknots will come and fair bust their selves with wheat.'

He said: 'There must be a terrible lot of money in selecting if it be done right.'

'There is that,' said Sary, brushing the down from her cheek. 'We done wonderful well... There's near a hundred in the bank and the *five hundred* bullicks (although they're really only calves yet!) and two hundred sheep.' A flushed, remote, excited look came

into her face. 'When the bullicks is ready for market — that'll be in from five to seven year if the seasons is good — why! we'll be rich!'

She put the stripped pigeons down in a row on the step, and said: 'Sandy, I'm beating you holler! I done four to your three!'

He said: 'There must be a terrible lot of money in agistment till you can get your own stock.'

She answered: 'Yes, it's good, but we didn't do too well on it — first of all the big drought put us back. Then the first lot of cattle we had on agistment — I thought as they would pay for the division fencing wire an' the pear poison — but there was a sort of mistake in the 'rangement I made. The man I took them from said 'at he would pay either a flat rate by the month or let me have the harf of what they brought over a certain price when they was fat. He said I'd most likely make a great lot that way... It took them three years to get fat, an' of course I couldn't take anything else while they was here. Cattle went down, an' when they was sold they only brought half the amount as I was to start gettin' half after... An' the two years arter the cattle went I couldn't get no agistment at all because the season was good everywhere — an' I hadn't money enough to stock. Then, when I had, I bought a fine lot of lambs from The Downs — an' they was wormy. A few weeks arter they come, they died so fast I couldn't keep up with skinning them. That put me back another two year... I think altogether, as you might say, the first ten or fifteen years or so of bein' on the land is often hard, but arter that you generally gets your bearings and gets started good — unless you has bad luck, of course.'

Sandy did not hear: he was thinking of how selections might become great stations; of lands reckoned in miles instead of acres... And, because admiration may survive the death of love, of Old H.B. as he had seen him only last month standing watching his fire-ploughs start around the boundaries — one plough to the east, one to the west, dragging behind their slow bullocks over the slow curve of the world...!

'And it be a bit lonesome at times selecting,' said Sary irrelevantly, worn hand pushing back her white hair: 'It's strange how you gets to look for a new face — I was real excited when you said you'd stay! Of course for me there aren't no real excuse for bein' lonely; it would be different if I lived by meself like some poor women does: but I got Denny and Perkins!'

'How is Perkins?' asked Sandy, breaking dreams of dust and glory and vast lands.

'He's real good,' said Sary, lifting bright face. 'He knew me yesterday — an' this morning he sat up in bed to take his gruel himself.'

'And Denny?'

'Good, too,' answered Sary, trimming the last tiny dove-blue feathers from about the legs of the last pigeon. 'It's his twenty-fifth birthday next month and I'm buying him a Jack-in-the-box. I seen it advertised in the paper. It looks terrible pretty in the picture — I'll show you.'

After it was shown, she added: 'But, as I was saying, you'll be needing a wife maybe — I'd like to see a nice girl get you, Sandy.'

He said arrogantly, in part defying the foolish human smart that had brought him to Sary: 'I gets my girls, but they don't get me!'

XX

Almost a year later, Sandy rode up to Tharlane Homestead through the warm summer dusk, when above the massed currajongs, the sky was veiled in lilac and pale rose clouds, through which showed the pale silver face of a moon, not yet quite at the full. The scent and the tender haze of burning rubbish-heaps filled the air, and the cow-bells sounded dreamily.

To Sandy, who had lived for the last twelve months very much alone on his selection, all the sounds and smells seemed good... only after you had lived for a long while in the bush did you realize how many smells there were about an established homestead!

To his eagerly questing nose there came now the smell of roasting meat and onions, of soap and tobacco, of hot iron, and airing freshly ironed clothes ... He even thought that he could smell the evening's milk supply standing near the separator... His senses tingled with a strange, foolish joyousness just to be again in close contact with many men, and to be going to talk with people, and eat a meal at a table with other men, and afterward to smoke with them in the moonlight and talk about ordinary things, and tell jokes and laugh. Everything seemed warm and good, and yet strange, as the faint blue veil of fire-smoke made the twilight strange and peaceful and stirring.

It was good to tread on dust trodden by many other feet!

... On the clean-scrubbed floor of the great dining-room, dingo- and kangaroo-skins were spread, and

on the long table was a white cloth and very much bright silver, and the two kerosene lamps that stood on it were shaded with crinkled red paper and looked like big poppies turned upside down...

And then he saw the girl coming in from the pantry with a vase of rose oleanders in her hands.

She did not notice him, and, moving between him and the light, bent over the table to set her little vase in place.

Her back was toward him, but he saw that her black dress was well-cut and slim, and the rosy lamplight brushed her smooth black hair, and caught the fine muslin frill that was fastened across the top of her head... like a little parrot's crest, thought Sandy. Yes, she looked just like a little trim dark bird with a rosy crest...! He stepped forward into the room eager to see her more closely, and from the garden came the scent of wet earth and blended with the perfume of the oleanders the girl had put on the table.

She turned suddenly, and against the rose of the lamp he saw her face, oval, piquant, and creamy, with dark grey eyes that were slightly uptilted at the corners, wide soft cheeks tapering to a delicate, childish chin, and a soft and pink mouth...

As he towered above her, his freckled, nondescript face assumed an expression of somewhat leering larrikinism considered particularly fascinating by the youth of the West, which expression he had perfected whilst conducting Gutters' Gambling School. He said: 'Well, how are we to-day?' And, because in matters of love he was simply Sandy the shearer and roustabout, he thought, 'I would like to do a line with this little tart.' And all Martha's ruffles shone

rosy and her lashes brushed her soft pale little cheeks and she went on setting the table.

And, although Sandy's face was freckled and red and nondescript, he stood six feet four, and his muscles moved silkily as he turned, while he carried his shoulders as though he was proud of them, and wore loose-seated trousers belted as low as possible, so that he could walk with a hitch, and he always used heliotrope scent when he went to a dance — and he was unused to girls who went on setting tables...

He said: 'Good-evening, Missie. She's been a bosker day.'

Martha's hands moved among the silver, and replaced a pink oleander in the little vase, and all about her brow the hair began in little gleaming down that lay every-which-way, and then the long hair lay close across her head, quite straight and close, but thick, for on her neck it was coiled into a braided knot that would have been too heavy except that her throat was so firm and straight and warmly cream, coming up out of the little thin white ruffled collar! On her little uptilted nose there were golden freckles, like a dust of tiny spangles, and freckles all about her eyes, and her mouth was pale, pale pink, and the lips covered with tiny lines like a flower petal when it is very new...

Sandy stuck his hands through his immense cartridge belt and smiled: 'Not playing speaks?'... And on either side of the ridiculous little white muslin apron she wore, you would see beneath the discreet blackness of her gown the soft small pointing of her two breasts. And suddenly Sandy felt the blood in his face and looked down.

'When you take your hat off...' she said, in a little

deep voice that made Sandy think of the way the thick cream came from the big separator — and he took his hat off and turned it in his great hands.

'Did you want to see Mr. Henrics?' asked she, and at one corner of her pale mouth there came just the hint of a dimple.

'I did,' said Sandy. 'But that was before I saw you...'

And the dusk of her lashes lay upon her pale cheeks, and the little deep voice said: 'What a pity! For Mr. Henrics is not busy and I am.' And she disappeared into the little pantry where the stores were kept.

Through that spring and heat-hushed summer Sandy rode very often to Tharlane Homestead, and learnt all about Martha the housemaid — as he dried the dishes for her after the dinner was finished at half-past eight every evening... A small tale of poverty and loneliness. She had, he ascertained, no one anywhere. She was afraid of the Bush, but glad to be at Tharlane because she earned so much money — nearly a pound a week — while in town she would have earned only twelve shillings. She also told him of a mysterious Box of Pretties that she had, and of the glories of its contents; and when he asked if he could see it, she laughed and shook her head...

About all these things — particularly the box — she would tell him, but when he tried to talk to her of her pale crinkled lips, that were like a flower petal that is still very new, the dimple came at the corner of her mouth and she laughed, and said small, gay, impertinent things in her little husky voice.

Or sometimes, if she was very tired, she would get

angry with him, with a sudden, hot anger, which did not greatly interest him at first, for he thought that it must be merely a new part of the old feigning that made the game men and women played the more amusing... But after a while he saw that it was not, and that she was really angry when she was tired and he tried to make her talk about him, and what *he* thought of *her!*

Her anger was always quickly gone, and once, when she had been rather unduly sharp, she told him that she was 'sorry,' and explained that she was 'a silly,' and getting up at half-past four of mornings to have the table ready for the five-o'clock breakfast somehow would make her so tired that she was 'all cross' at night. Then, too, he began to notice how often the dark shadows lay under her eyes, and that to get through the day's work she had often to go at a little walk that was so fast it was almost a run... And also that she was very glad of the help he gave her with the washing-up. And presently, all training to the contrary, he saw that she was not playing a game with him, but that her little gaieties and angers were the shield of something real... With this knowledge the game he had been playing because he found it diverting became a game that he played with whole strength, because, for the time at least — and he supposed that it would be only for a time — she became to him the one desire of life!... And he began to woo her with tender subtleties that men had never bothered, or had need, to use in the wooing of the women he had known. And with the greater skill of his love-making, he found in it a greater excitement — and at times a something that was almost a cruel laughter at her little efforts to escape him stirred in

his brain, for, as with Red Dog whom he had hunted long ago, he was so very sure...

This was the thing that a man wanted when the earth wasn't enough, when he was lonely for something more than trees! He wanted a girl to get!

There came a time when she was less witty in her little retorts to him, and when he would see the gladness leap up in her deep grey eyes when she saw him. And, if his hands touched hers as she dried the hot, gleaming plates, he would notice that the little muslin frills at her wrists trembled, and her small pointed breasts under the black stuff of her dress rose and fell sharply; he knew, too, that she was afraid of him, and the knowledge sent the fire through his veins with much the same fierce, cruel joy that he had felt when he shot Red Dog: only that with this joy there ran a sweetness-of-wishing that was almost pain to him, too. For although he knew that she would say him 'yes' — somewhere under the stars when the smell of the dust came up to them — yet he found that the nights of waiting held more of emptiness than he had known a night might hold, and he stretched his arms downward and back, feeling their strength and youth, and their emptiness, to each finger-end!

At the thought of what would be between them, his heart beat thickly, and he felt the surge of it in his strong, young throat, for he knew, and cared nothing for the baseness of the knowing, that it was because she had chosen to keep away such as he that her little hands were roughened and blunted and the dark shadows of weariness hung under her eyes. And because he knew that she had guarded this poor small sweetness of hers as something very precious, he wanted it as he had never wanted the light-love freely given, claimed for joy of living's sake.

Love was a stake men played for, and he played now with Martha, who dropped a plate so that it broke into little pieces when he closed his wet hand over hers... And, when he kept the hand there, closing it more and more closely, he saw the sudden tears on her lashes, tears which she hid with her little work-scarred hands when he freed them! And when she ran out of the room, he felt only his power, and as he finished the washing-up, he smiled at his thoughts.

Then for five days he was perforce away after his cattle, and he came back when the great heat of afternoon held the world and the currajong boughs hung motionless above their motionless shadows on the hot red ground... And he remembered that every one was going to the Murgan cricket match, and the great homestead lay deserted to the stillness and the heat. Even the dogs were asleep, and the white ducks under the oleanders had laid their heads on their wings and only opened their green eyes for a moment as he passed — listening to the loud sound of his own footsteps across the dusty yard.

A fat mouse was sitting among the potatoes and onions spread beneath the tank-stand and Sandy vowed its eyes were closing under the general drowsiness. The hot still air was filled with the scent of the flowering ironbarks, and a few grey leather-birds were clattering in the insignificant flower masses that showed palely cream against the deep blue sky. A few pink-and-grey parrots toddled about the yard...

Then, he knew not why, but he turned toward Martha's little iron room away under the weeping currajongs, and he crossed toward it over the clean-swept red dust, walking lightly... and in the shad-

owed heat of her curtained verandah, he saw her kneeling beside a small battered tin box. He walked softly that he might see her unobserved for a few minutes while the fire leapt through his veins, for in all the miles of summer stillness there were only he and she.

Beyond her little verandah he saw the hot darkness of her little room shuttered against the glare, and he remembered the tears that she had hidden with her little blunt hands, and he knew that she could not say him 'no' any longer, and that he would taste his joy here in the vast heat and hush, and not under the stars... He stood in the mingled shadow and looked at her and his hands closed slowly into fists while he smiled...

And still she did not see him, but busied herself with her little box, and he knew by the lines of her kneeling figure and the curve of her cheek that she was happy. Then she looked up at him, not because he had made any sound, but seeming to feel the intensity of his gaze. Her face was pale with the heat and her hair hung in wisps about it and some of them stuck to her skin, which was pricked with little beads of moisture about her brows and beneath her eyes; her lips were parted as she breathed...

At sight of him, she did not start, but the colour flowed up and up in deep even pink across her wide soft cheeks and little nose and moist brow, and her eyes grew glad as no one else's had ever grown at sight of Sandy, and in her hand she held a little cheap pink silk pincushion covered with openwork crochet, and in the other hand was the tissue paper from which she had just unwrapped it... And so strange a thing is the soul of man that he, the spoiler, was quite dis-

armed by that little pincushion, and the fire in his veins was transmuted to a tenderness so great that it left him weak and trembling while still she smiled at him.

She said: 'There was such a lot to do getting ready, and I got so tired, I only wanted to sit still, and I didn't go... And then, after every one had gone, I was lonely, and so I got out my pretties to look at...' And she wrapped the pincushion carefully up again, and got to her feet shaking out her little black dress.

He went to her quickly and put his arms about her small shoulders and drew her against him very carefully lest he hurt her little pointed breasts; and he wanted to stand between her and every evil of life and to take her where she might never be tired or lonely, and to put his hands under her feet in their little wide-toed worn shoes that she did not like, and to pour out his life for her, and die for her if need be. But because it is hard to express those things even if a man hath the gift of words, and was quite impossible for Sandy, he only held her very carefully and dropped his face against her hair while he whispered: 'Marry me, Martha. Martha, Martha, marry me!'

After a long while she said with shy happiness, 'You could see it now if you like, Sandy'; and when he looked at her without comprehension, she whispered: 'The Box.'

XXI

That year the Ox fainted when he was lifting a bag of wheat; and because the 'indigestion pain' made him afraid when he even thought of it, he went to see a doctor, who said that, if he was not careful, he would surely die of angina pectoris (which meant 'a-stopping of your heart'). But when the Ox came back and told people, they warned him not to take notice of 'quack doctors,' and they were amused — particularly Luther — for you had only to look at the Ox to see that there was nothing the matter with him!

They advised him 'to forget it' — so he tried to forget both what the doctor had said and the pain as well...

Men resting between the 'runs' at the sheds, or drifting in from the infinities of plain and bush to the hospitality of Murgers' Bar, mentioned how nearly the Ox had been deceived into thinking himself ill, and said that it showed that a man must be careful...

The gossips also commented on the fact that Sandy Gutter was married and was making a right good husband, for — and thus are husbands judged in the West — he always had the wood-box 'full as a tick.'

But interest in both these things was lost because of the doings at The Block.

From out the Old Backs Homestead there had flowed a dazed, incredulous procession of Backs: lost and tragic, driven from their warm and greasy nest — knowing not where to go! They had not gone easily, so rumour had it. The lady of the peroxided hair had driven them from the house, and they had slept, not

unhappily, in the outhouses and against the wood-stacks... For it was summer. She had driven them farther before her fiery tongue and imperiously stamping foot — and they had camped along the creek and stolen food and eggs at night. Only when she threatened to poison their dogs and horses did they begin to drift away, in strange groups with stranger drays and odd-wheeled sulkies... Old Backs had not stirred to save them, for he, who had enslaved so grandly, was slave at last to a painted girl. Only in one thing he was stubborn — he would not sell The Block. In place of the vanished Backs, his wife brought certain of her masculine friends from Murgan to work the run. And she began to spend. On jewels, on furs, and clothes and cars. Not getting always particularly good value for her money, but getting always value that could be easily transported. To the Old Backs Homestead she begrudged one nail or blot of paint.

And at the end of two years of her rule, The Block was mortgaged and remortgaged. So that, in this, 'the year in which Drover Abel bought his Ford' — for thus are years identified in the West — Mrs. Backs went to Old H. B., and standing before him, fair head flaming from dusky furs, she told him to go to Old Backs and he would sell at H. B.'s terms.

'They writ 'im this morning,' she said, eyes shining. 'The bank 'as told him he *must* sell!'

They went together, Delilah, and the Philistines — in the person of Old H. B. But at the Old Backs Homestead was no sign of Old Backs. The young Mrs. Backs served dinner from a can, and then went to look for her husband.

The night was one of grey cloud-films and faint

moonlight. She searched by the creek, by the wood-heap, by the yards, and at last saw the gleam of his white hair down under the ironwoods on the flat. Young Mrs. Backs made for him swiftly.

He was seated on a log, sitting hunched forward — his head between his hands, his silver beard and hair decking him with a venerable pathos out of accord with his life... The moonlight fell over the leaf-littered grave at his feet, in sparks and flickers of silver. Then, as the woman looked, it seemed to her that at his knees crouched another figure, dark arms about his knee, head pressed in comfort against his side... A trick of light and shadow, a snare of the varied moon!

But she called, with the added roughness of fear, 'Come 'ere, old fool!' and hurryingly, placatingly, he came.

And so Tharlane had its proper shape on the map!

XXII

In the rosy dawn-glow, while Martha sang as she cooked the dripping toast and stirred the stewed goat meat and onions, Sandy whistled as he carried up the water for the day — for they were married and so very happy!

At breakfast one morning Sandy said: 'I were thinking about what you said about their getting flour an' sugar that much cheaper at Tharlane because they gets it in big lots. It seems kind of strange to get big lots of stuff all at once for a little house like us, but it *are* cheaper. I asked the bookkeeper.'

'We could maybe save two or three pounds a year if we got it that ways,' said Martha. 'That would buy lots of things — though p'r'aps we had ought to put it in the bank.'

He said: 'Some day you'll be able to spend two pounds and think nothing of it!'

And she, pausing with a big blue saucepan in her hands, considered this possibility and repudiated it: 'I wouldn't never be extravagant, thank you!' said Martha, moving away with the saucepan. 'Not,' she added, 'that it wouldn't be nice to know you *could* spend like that!'

But for all their happiness he was afraid sometimes that she was not, never would be — of the bush. White roses were not! She said gently that it were such a pity that 'it' — the bush he loved so — 'couldn't be tidied up.' And when Martha, who had lived all her life within reach of butchers' shops, talked to Sary of the difficulties of her housekeeping,

she said, explaining the hardships of the bush: 'It be so hard to have to kill a whole goat at a time!' And left the startled Sara wondering what other more sectional methods of despatching goats prevailed elsewhere.

When Sandy, drunk with enraptured melody, said, 'Oh, Marthee — have you heard the larks all day?' she lifted gentle eyes and answered: 'Aren't they singing! It be a wonder they don't wear out, Sandy.'

... And there were 'just sometimes' trouble more serious than the troubles of housekeeping... On their first Christmas night they had guests, and Sandy cut forks from the box-tree twigs, and Martha spread the brightest newspapers for tablecloths, while they drank from new neatly turned jam tins... And Sandy kept pressing his guests to more plum-pudding, encouraged, as he supposed, by the gentle touches of Martha's little blunt shoe. Until, Old H. B. having agreed to a second helping, Sandy saw horror in Martha's eyes, and guessed that there was no more!

After tea, when Old H. B. and the other men had gone, she told of her cleverness, with delicately flushed delight, '... I *couldn't* say there was no more, Sandy, so I had to say "Shoo!" in a great big voice, and pretend to drive a doggy out of the kitchen — *when there was no doggy there!* And then I came back and said, "Oh, dear! Bluey stole it... the pudding!"' Her eyes shone softly with her wickedness and cleverness. Her arms were rosy with the hot water, and, as she lifted a stack of plates, her body bent exquisitely back.

He said, 'Come out with me!' So when the dishes were finished, they walked out into the warm night, where the scent of the dust came to them and all the

stars were shining. The air was hot and filled with smells of dust, of sheep, of ripe grasses, of almond creeper.

She said: 'Oh, let's find it... the sweet creeper.'

The little puffs of air bearing the perfume came blowing from along the Old Mail Road, and down this they turned, Martha picking her way ahead of Sandy, the starlight just gleaming on her smooth hair. The darkness of the trees hung above the lighter tones of the tall grass: earth seemed very secret beneath the stars.

An old man kangaroo thudded across the road ahead... there were endless little night noises. She said, 'It's over to the right...' and with her hands slightly spread began to move through the tall grass. The scent became overpowering, honeyed-sweet, tinged with the smell of almonds. There was the whirring of elephant moths' wings. Martha called, 'Oh, here!'

A tall broken stump was carpeted and covered with creamy-yellowish coral of tiny flower clusters, and moths whirred all about them, invisible in the star-dimness.

She said, 'Oh, it won't break, Sandy!' — and one little hand tugged at a flowering strand while the other was braced against the tree. The tough stems gave suddenly and sent her staggering backward, laughing and trailing her honeyed branch. A big white bird swooped down on soft feathers between them and was gone.

Sandy caught her in his arms so suddenly that she dropped her creepers and cried, '*Oh, Sandy!*'

He smiled.

She said, with horror, 'Oh, Sandy, you're *drunk!*'

None was better qualified than Sandy to know the injustice of this charge. He laughed shortly and said: 'I are not! Kiss me!'

She struggled with small, absurdly futile protest, crying, 'Oh, please, please, *no!*' And he answered — for are not men the lords of the earth? — 'What I wants, I takes!'

And, as is frequently the way with those who take what they wish, he found that he had taken much that was unexpected besides, for she sat cowered in the tall grass by the old decaying stump, weeping into her fingers. He bent over her and said, half in anger, half perplexity, 'But you're my wife!' Whereat she only sobbed, and then said in a small, gasping voice, very threateningly: 'I would like to go away! I won't stay with you — you're a wicked, *drinking man!*'

He withdrew comforting arms and said: 'Well, go! I'm sick o' this "stop drinkin', stop drinkin'," when I aren't never had a skin full since we was hitched! If I aren't good enough — go!'

She looked up, raising small, desolate face to the starlight, to the vast encompassing darkness of the bush of which she was afraid, and said in a voice so small that he could hardly hear it: 'I aren't nowhere to go — I couldn't find the way!'

In a flash all his anger was gone and, although he still knew that he had not been drunk at all, not even 'shickered,' he saw how small she was and remembered how alone they were, and how very wonderful it was that she, who had blunted her little hands keeping away such as he, should yet have come to share all his nights and days — with nowhere to go from him!... And of how she loved the little white-

paper treble-frilled everlastings because they 'looked just like some one had made them,' and how she had thought it strange that the little larks didn't wear out...!

And he gathered her into his arms sitting on a fallen branch of the old creeper tree, and pressed her face against his neck, and said: 'Oh, don't say that, Marthee... I never thought like that! I can't bear you to say like that. Not you got nowhere to go, dear...'

They had said no more about it, but Sandy was afraid that she thought of 'his drinking' when her gentle head bent over her crucifix, and sometimes he saw trouble in her eyes... He was sorry, but still it was a silliness she would grow out of — a man who worked earned a 'nip.' It was part of being a man! Then one night he came in very tired and poured himself out his 'nip' and tasted it, and looked startled, while his face darkened with anger... and then in the broken mirror he caught sight of Martha, with her hands up to her face and looking so clever and secret that he suddenly drank off the evil contents of the glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand...

A few days thereafter they heard the music of Old Luther's bullock-bells as he brought their first loading across their own flat through the golden evening — almost a whole wagonload of it!

'It makes you feel like as if we were big squatters already,' said Sandy, as they stood together at the door and watched the team lumbering toward them with the gold dust rising from about the bullocks' feet, and the sound of Luther's whip and his loud cries of 'Wu-be-ack' reaching them through the stillness.

'It were worth getting the big lot — just to see it come!' said Martha, giggling, and they laughed inordinately at the joke, with their fingers twined.

'I guess we'll let the Graziers Company do our shearin' this year,' he said largely, and they tightened their interlocked arms and laughed at each other. Because their last shearing had been done with a pair of old scissors with their one sheep kicking on a table — and because they had nearly three hundred sheep now! He kissed her, although Luther was by this time hardly a hundred yards away, calling 'Wu-be-ack, Snowy! Wu-be-ack, Tiger! Wu-be-ack, Stripy!' in a voice that shook the evening.

'Well, well, I'm glad to see you both!' roared Luther as they met him at the gate. 'You looks uncommon well!'

A sudden and quite visible thought passed over his ancient benignly peering countenance.

'I begs your pardon, Marthee!' he shouted, and one hand searched desperately through the ruins of his garments, which, he explained — as he had been explaining for thirty years — he had clear forgotten to take to Mrs. Barwon to mend. 'My eye...' said Luther, not as an exclamation, but explanatorily, groping the while in his nether breeches '... It were there this mornin' — I knows, for I *set* on it.' He thought deeply.

'*I knows!* I took it out an' put it in the fryin'-pan to be safe till we got started — an' then I left 'em both! Well, Marthee,' he added, as one who has done his best, 'I always *have* wore me eye for ladies, but I can't this time, so you must *excoose* me.'

The bullocks lay down one by one to chew. Martha

put the kettle on and came back to sit on the step by Sandy's side while Luther smoked on the big log below them.

'Well,' said the old man suddenly, so that the retiring hens by the wood-heap broke into agitated cackling, 'I bought me *circul-ier* po'table saw an' I'm going to supply Murgan with firewood by contract!'

'I thought as Old H. B. advised you not to buy it?' said Sandy with certain concern.

'He did,' admitted the owner; 'but then he thought as what they claimed for it were not true.'

'Then why...' began Sandy, looking tenderly at the withered giant, but Luther interrupted him.

'Oh, I weren't a bird to be caught with lime!' bellowed the ancient Luther, his one eye alight with cunning. 'I took care afore I buyed.'

'What did you do, Daddy Luther?' asked Martha, her chin in her hands.

'I wrote to 'em and asked 'em!' cried Luther triumphantly, and the loud-flying, heavy bronze-wing pigeons, who had just been dropping down to the sheep troughs, hurried back to the dark shelter of the trees. 'I wrote a real good letter,' said Luther, fumbling in his pocket and bringing out several hand fuls of dirty papers, which he muttered were 'just copies in the rough.' 'I said,' he continued, spreading one sheet to the dim light, '"Dear Mr. Malcolm's Incorporated Esq., I am thinkin' of buyin' a saw plant an' was wonderin' if what your advertisements said about them was all correct an' true?" *They said it were!*' said Luther.

But Sandy was looking past him at the loaded wagon. 'What,' he asked, rising slowly to his feet — 'what are them tins on top of our flour?'

'Them,' said Luther, still reading his letter — 'Them be H. B.'s kerosene. I wanted it to ride soft like, case it were sprung anywheres...'

Later, Sandy and Martha sat them down upon a year's keroseney flour, and the fading jingle of Luther's bullock-bells drifted to them under the starlight as he went back in search of his eye.

Martha giggled: 'We seen it come, anyway, Sandy!'

He raised wrathful, tragic face from his hands.

She said — and dimly he saw the dimples: 'It's fine for keeping colds away — kerosene!'

He knelt before her: 'You wouldn't ever want to go leave me, Marthee? And... and, love, you can throw out the bottle of cold tea what you gave me for rum, if you likes... I won't drink at all no more!'

She hung her head and whispered: 'Mrs. MacSpee said as Jim never noticed when *she* done it!'

XXIII

This year, in spite of local drought, the sheep flocks of Tharlane totalled one hundred thousand.

The original fifteen thousand worn-faced old ewes from the North, had served their purpose, and been sold long ago — to the fat-stock butchers and 'the boiling down'... Both these ends were seemingly ungracious returns for their labours, but they had caused Old H. B. no pang, and were, after all, better fates than those which must otherwise have been theirs in the lands too vast and new for gentleness; where every animal who does not die suddenly by the hand of man, or the fangs or beak of the things of prey, must die at last — inevitably as the setting of the fierce suns brings the nights — most slowly and most terribly. Die of the weakness of old age — when what might be a last peace of coming sleep is broken by ants and crows, or little foxes that bite out the tongue... Die of grass fires that scorch and maim, and leave their victims to creep perplexed about an unfamiliar, blackened world... Die perhaps from grass-seeds set with little barbs that work in and in, through wool and skin and flesh... Die from thirst or slow starvation.

... It was a part of the earth-battle; the patient brethren of wool and hide, but the pathetic tools in the contest of man with the savage earth.

In the settled and gentle places of the world there is perhaps the shepherd for the sick lamb, the compassionate watcher for the lambing ewe; but where land is reckoned by miles and the miles by thousands, and

stock losses or increases by thousands, animal birth is watched only by the birds of prey, animal death by the same grim witnesses. It cannot be otherwise.

Where fierce heat and life walk hand in hand there is pain. Pain, where are linked savagery and production, immensity and labour, ruthlessness and success...

The little Bush Brother once overheard Old H. B. debating with an overseer as to whether or not they would mate the ewes — if it rained before the lambing, all would be well... If it did not rain, ten thousand lambs would be born to starve! Old H. B. said, 'We'll take no blanky chance!'

The Bush Brother said in horror: 'But that's *cruil!*'

The old man regarded him deliberately: 'Crool h'as 'ell — but Life's crooler... Though h'it mayn't be h'in h'a h'English drawin' room! O' course...!'

With the proceeds of the sale of his gentle ewes to the butchers Old H. B. had bought ewe weaners to run with the old ewes' lambs, and then, with a young and virile flock, began to practise his new theories of breeding and grazing... and gradually the phrase 'mad as Old H. B.' waned in popularity.

There were years when the scurrying, brainless armies of the rabbits threatened him; years when hardly a lamb was born to live; years when the buzzing hordes of the blowflies brought their growing menace...

But the crown of each year's labour — the Big Shearing — became an ever more important event. Men regulated their work by 'the month Tharlane shore.'

The Drover Abel Crosset could not count on help

with his parched wheat until Tharlane shearing was finished, because all the local boys were hoping for 'picking up'... John Smith's rams had to wait a full ten weeks because Donald the Shearer was 'ringing' the Tharlane Shed...

It was from Tharlane Shed that Donald took back the biggest check of the year to Georgina, waiting for him in their tiny home 'down the river' to the east of Tharlane.

The Big Shearing came in December, and Tharlane's great iron wool-shed leapt into rushing, vibrating life, while through it poured, in sudden turmoil, the small footed, woolly wealth of the West.

The sheep, jostled in their thousands from their inoffensive, pattering, baa-ing life-ways, rolled in a dusty, bleating river through the pens. Driven from the little shadowed pads among the grey mulga; from the purple-shouldered spinneys; from nibbling ice-plants on the red sandhills, and from their tranquil congregations by the little artesian streams; urged and frightened, and utterly stupid, they came, woolly and grey-brown with dust, into the roaring shed. Here they were stripped of their wool-wealth; the wealth of a nation that would go toward the clothing of a chilly world. Then, terrified, bruised, and streaked with little smears of blood, they poured out of the shed again, shrunken and ridiculous and cream-coloured, to be rescattered over the scorched land, there to nibble out another year of gentle life.

In the shed were heat and wool and haste; wool, wool, wool!... There were carelessness, cruelty and hate; bravery of endurance and good comradeship; great tales by the fires when the day's shearing was

finished; reckless gambling; and over all the work went on...

In that year of 'the hundred thousand shed,' Donald the Shearer's clothing was in even greater contrast than usual to his one-time elegance of ox-blood booting and silver spur. He even wore his greatcoat open down the front because it had shrunken until it would no longer meet about his great chest. Donald said that he liked it open; men said that Donald had 'struck hard times.' He had, in fact, struck what is perhaps synonymous — paternity!

For when, returning from his sheds and hunting trips, he wanted to take Georgina in his arms to kiss her full upon the mouth, as a man should, he was hard put to it to accomplish this, for the small hands that plucked at his sleeves, and the things which sprang upon his shoulders, and gurgled about his boots...

To Old H. B. he said, with eyes adance as he straightened from a long 'run' (the record of that shearing year): 'I'd need undress all your hundred thousand meself, H. B., to keep them little ones in bootees — an' the bigger ones in pretties an' at school! — An' I'm but a decrepit wreck to what I were! Th' day's comin' when some one will beat o' me on the shearing board!... Oh, we fought a great fight together on our wee place on the creek, my Georgina — the sweet! — an' me! An' we're growin' old together — or leastways I am! There's little change I see in her, an' where love is ——'

'Phump!' said Old H. B.

XXIV

With the second year of Sandy and Martha's marriage, there were still fewer 'sometimes' when they were not happy, and men said that Sandy 'looked as snug as a bug in a rug' — he himself could not quite have told why! But his joy was compounded of a new sureness that she did not want to go away, a rapturous conceit that after two years with him her eyes still lighted so at his coming...

And yet, although old H. B. laughed at the dryness of the year, saying it was a 'joke' and not a drought, it was bitter enough for Sandy.

Every day he rode the same round of fetid waterholes in the drying creek and with the aid of his horse dragged out such of the bogged cattle as were still alive, and knew with certainty that if they were not dead he would pull them out again to-morrow, and the next day... Then came the hot hours of cutting half-withered mulga to feed the few hundred slowly dying sheep (the sheep that they had planned The Graziers would shear next year!) and, as he cut, the futile wonder as to what would happen if the mulga gave out, as it had in the Great Drought! Then there was his evening round of plucking wool from the stinking carcasses of the dead sheep, and lifting other woolly bodies which it was too late to pluck onto fallen logs that the sun might dry them with the wool unrotted... And always the steady upcreeping of debt... A time of struggle, truly, a slow, bitter struggle played out on the red, half-naked flank of the world under the violet blueness of the drought sky. The earth-battle in its bitterness...

A time of wonder: for in the little house near the Big Tank, the little house that was built half of bark, half of iron, was Martha. Her white caps had been put away, but she was still neat and very trim in black dresses with white ruffles: very mended little dresses, but neat and trim as a little dark bird might be: *his* little dark bird...! For all new sureness, when he thought of her in the little house, he could never be quite sure... It was so strange that she was there — with her soft small face with its wide creamy cheeks and sad eyes that lit for love when he came... and the place where the dimple lived at the pale corner of her mouth. So strange that she was facing with him the hot barrenness of the drought — so brave and so uncomplaining, even although it was 'so hard to manage where you had to kill a whole goat at a time'! And although at times it hurt him beyond bearing to see the dark circles under her eyes again, and how wearily she leant against the door while she waited... until she saw him!

Sitting on their doorstep after tea, he would take her little blunted hands in both of his and want to tell her how brave she was, and how sweet beyond all sweet, and how beautiful she made the little house. But all he could ever do was to tell her about the things he would give her by and by, whereat she laughed at him, and rubbed her head against him and said: 'I wouldn't like that near as well as just you and me here, Sandy... I'm going to make such a *nice pie* for tea to-morrow night, Sandy! With eggs in it — and lots of jelly.' Or she might reproach him for never having noticed the new 'cut-papers' on the kitchen shelves, or the new picture of the 'Hounds and Hunters' that she had put up on the dining-room

wall... 'Such a lovely picture, Sandy, with an old castle in the back all towers and ivy'; and Martha would wonder how merchants could afford to send out such beautiful pictures with just a box of tea, and they would consider the vast sums that great companies must spend in advertising (and penny art prints)... And no matter how tired Sandy was, he would always go and see the new shelves and the new picture, and admire them greatly; for it was one little way of telling her how much she was loved.

Dear, all these things.

Dearer still, her 'taking care' of him.

Folded handkerchiefs were sewn into the crowns of his wide felt hats to keep off the sun, and Sandy, talking across the fence to the less-prized sons of Old Earwig, would carelessly twirl the hats that the folded handkerchiefs might be seen and commented on — so strange it was that his living or dying so mattered to any one!

About his young bull's neck he wore a chain with a little silver cross and a bag of camphor on the end which rose and fell with his gold-thatched chest; in cold weather his supple, lion-strong middle was happily encircled with a flannel bandage lest he take chill. He would leave a grass-seed in his hand for half a day because he 'couldn't be bothered' — or perhaps that Martha might take it out 'and kiss the place'! So are strong men disarmed!

Dear things all of these, but dearer still their nights together after toil and day were shut away, and when he would say, 'Let's forget the letter from the Bank, Marthee — it wouldn't never come to their taking the place, dear!' and she would say: 'Our lovely little house, Sandy? — *Of course they wouldn't!*'

And with hardly him telling her at all, she understood all about everything, the circus and the bullock and the burn on his hand, and all the apologies he had had to make; and if she thought of any of them her lips would find the little burnt place on his great palm and cling to it, trying, as love always will, to kiss away the sorrow of life.

Then, when Sandy came home on a rather chill winter afternoon, to the little house where the wonderfully white window-curtains blew in and out defying the ceaseless drifting of the red dust, he noticed a new quality in Martha, as though she had a very important secret... He wondered a little about it as he sat on the doorstep waiting for her to finish setting the table, and while he sat there the wind changed and grew warm and slow, and down the north and east clouds began to bank... low fat grey clouds that grew leaden-lilac against the pink dusk and began to creep up the sky... And by the time Martha and Sandy had finished the washing-up, the whole sky was clouded over, and from up the wind came the mysterious scent of rain, that is sweeter than any scent in the world and more exciting.

They stood together on the doorstep and smelled it, and his right hand held her left, and the smell of rain grew stronger and stronger, and with it there came a great soft thrumming sound, and Martha and Sandy squeezed each other's hands and did not speak, because they were listening and hoping so.... And then a big drop fell on the iron roof and another on Martha's cheek, and she laughed with gladness, and then the flooding and roar of rain drowned anything they might have wanted to say and drove them from

the doorstep. And although it was not really cold, the rain made the fire seem so exciting and safe and wonderful that they went to it and sat on the rug, with their arms about their knees, listening to the roar and rush and thunder of steady, steady rain. And at ten o'clock Martha brought plates and bread-and-butter and cheese and cooked Sandy a Welsh rabbit ... And outside they could hear the new note of the creek coming down, adding a rushing and swishing sound to the vast sound of rain.

And they knew that the little house was really theirs and not the Bank's!

Sandy, very happy with his mouth very full, called to her, 'This rabbit's heaps nicer than just toast; do have a piece...' But she munched her toast and shook her head and her face grew all rosy in the firelight, and she looked at him with laughing, shining, secret eyes, and then she looked dreadfully serious and said: 'No, I *can't* have any — not even a *little little bit*...!'

The rain shut them in delightfully. He called, 'Oh, you must have some, Marthee.' And now he saw to his astonishment that there were tears in her eyes. '*I can't*,' she said tragically. He swallowed a savoury, scalding mouthful. 'Oh, I haven't eaten it all, have I?' cried Sandy, agitatedly trying to see the plate. And at that she broke into peals of little deep laughter, screwing up her wet lashes like a mischievous, delighted child: 'No! No! No!' cried Martha. '*Oh, Sandy! Sandy!*'

He looked at her face radiant with love, and said: 'What, Marthee?'

And at that she went into another peal of childish glee and answered inexplicably, 'Because I can't eat

any, any Welsh rabbit, Sandy!' She had risen to her knees with her hands clasped before her, and suddenly into her face had come a lifted, rapturous, holy expression as of a young priestess. He rose quickly and knelt before her, taking her clasped hands in his, looking down into her flushed soft face and deep eyes.

Before the fire in the great solemnity of night they formed a strangely dramatic group. Love and Youth, surely kneeling before the eternal flame of Life... She looked up and he down, and seeming to yield to him her life and the inmost secrets of her life, she leant to him and said, '*Yes*, Sandy, dear...!'

Love is ever blind. He said: 'I were mean to eat the lot!'

... With the going of the rain an early spring came to the West Country, and work was no longer a fruitless struggle against overwhelming odds; it was touched once more with the glow of creation... the earth-battle's delight!

New tender grass set with bluebells and tiny mauve daisies washed about the feet of Sandy's big bay horse; new lambs tumbled wobblesomely into a world which they regarded with a quite unwarranted amount of confidence... Fire-white, thin-petalled spider lilies flowered in the box flats; their tall flower stems showing like white candles through the dusk when the sky grew lilac and newly tender stars came out...

And Sandy, building new fences and marking lambs, and riding about his paddocks that were to work for her and for new wonders, found the last slight vestiges of old loneliness dissolved, and at his heart a happy triumph that passed all words, and was

like a stirring of new life within himself almost, out of joy at the new life that had come to her... It was as though she, his pale-and-sweet, was his utterly at last. He felt for her the fierce tenderness of a conqueror. To him in the first weeks of joy, their joy was not for a child, and it almost hurt him to have Martha speak of it with shy, playful delight as a child. To Sandy it was simply the crown of their loving: the final proof and hidden bond of their unity. He treated her with a gentleness that passed all his other gentlenesses to her, but he was at the same time masterful in his caresses, in his enfolding of her, thinking always, with a joy that he found no means of expressing, 'Mine, mine — why, I've done *this* to you...!' Oh, she was his! his! his! mastered of him: obedient to the life of him: pregnant with him... He might be close to her or away from her — and still he was with her... And Sandy sang as he worked, raising plain freckled face to the sun, glad with sheer, inarticulate gladness of life.

With young tender gallantry of love they met or tried to meet the problem of their youth and her motherhood, having nothing save love and ignorance wherewith to meet them. Much that should not have been they thought natural; a thousand things that might have made safe their crown of loving they had never heard of. Because of love they stumbled triumphantly through pain that could not be avoided, and more pain that need not have been, and terrible puzzlements, and new emotions, that, because they came unawares, were needlessly difficult and hurting.

... Still, because they so loved each other, through all puzzlements they stumbled, still loving, and they conquered all mistakes save the last mistake: and in

that they miscalculated the great day of danger and joy by many weeks. So that, when Sandy came home one evening of lilac and rose and still heat, much like the evening when he had first seen her, he found the little house terrible with pain and the little deep voice, so beloved, broken by agony.

Her hands that closed about his were so cold and weak that he kissed them wildly, trying to warm them. He smothered her with kisses, crushed the small cold hands that had been blunted with work when they should have been playing... And he learnt, with anguish that left him so weak that he almost fell across her, that she had lain thus through all the day... 'I prayed and prayed for you to come. Oh, cruel, cruel...!' she cried, and then through all her pain whispered, 'Dear, dear Sandy!' Then: 'I tried everything to bring you, Sandy. I — I tied my hanky to Bluey's collar, but he wouldn't *go*...! Oh, he wouldn't *go* for me!' and her voice rose to a cry of pain. '... I put things on the fire to make it smoke...! Oh, I did *so* think you would *see* the smoke'; and he saw that her cold hands were blackened with smoke and one was burned and marked with a little bruise. 'I nearly fell in the fire, Sandy... my forehead all cut ... Oh, Sandy, don't let them hurt me so!' He gave her milk, pouring it down her breast and splashing her face. 'It wasn't as if I didn't *try* to get you... Oh, you *might* have seen the smoke! I was so *sure* you would come to the smoke... You couldn't have *looked*, Sandy!' Then she cried, moaningly, shrilly, as a child cries, 'Help me, Sandy, help me!' He tried desperately, in anguish; but he could not help her, and she became so inarticulate with pain that he thought her dying. Then, as if her capacity for pain

was exhausted, she lay still — her face pathetically splashed with tears and milk, her breath hardly audible.

He lit the two lamps that she might not be in the dark... if utmost horror came to them, might not die in the dark; and then, putting water and milk beside her, he fastened on his spurs with desperate fingers... When he was ready, he ran to her and bent above her, praying: 'O God! O God! if she dies, don't let her know that I've left her!' He dared not kiss her, for he believed her sleeping, but he kissed her pillow, her bed, her covering. He stretched his arms above her as though shielding her from some unknown horror, he prayed beside her with clenched hands, and, as he rose to leave her, she opened her eyes and smiled. She looked at him as no one else had ever looked at Sandy, with a shining and a joy that filled all her eyes... He knelt again and cried to her, 'Back soon, love! Oh, back soon!' and then she screamed with terror, 'No! No!... all day... no! no! no more!... Look, Sandy, look... Truly all day alone...' And she showed him her blackened hands and the little hurt on her wrist and brow, and wildly pointed to the ashes, light and black, eddying about the floor in the breath of the summer wind. Then anguishing him she called in a wild, whispering voice, 'Bluey! Bluey!' and as he undid her hands she broke into bitter weeping. 'Oh, cruel, cruel, not to look... Oh, he will come in a minute! Oh, wait, Sandy, you will see... his collar... Oh, all day! Not all night alone! Oh, Sandy, I will be good...' Sobbing, knowing that he wasted time that might be life, he ran back to her and embraced her, saying he knew not what; in his arms she cried wildly that he must not be angry with

her. He said: 'Soon, soon, back again... Oh, love, I must! I must!' She, with eyes brilliant and wild, and pink in her soft wide cheeks, cried with sudden anger: 'I have done no wrong... You will not leave me! I will not be left!... *I will come!*' He rushed to the door. As he did so, she tried to rise, and could not, her face flushed and crumpled with her effort and her fear. 'Oh, Sandy, I *can't*...! Oh, Sandy, I *can't*...! *Carry me, Sandy!* Please, please...!' He could not answer her. He ran back for the last time, kissed her blindly, stumbled through the door, and, looking back from the darkness, saw her fall helplessly among her pillows stricken, incredulous... As he unhooked the bridle and turned to run to the horse-yards, he looked again. She was gazing now at the light, breathing hard, her eyes dilated with terror, abandoned, lost. Believing he himself was dying, he saw her eyes wander up the quilt, and find the little bruise, and express their hurt, then she smiled and, turning weakly, raised the hand with a smile... as he knew with horror, waiting for his kiss... and then again the hurt surprise... 'Sandy,' she whispered, with reproach that could not believe: 'Sandy, it was *hurt*, my hand!'

... He wondered afterward how often in those hours she waited for him and raised her little hand for love's healing and found herself abandoned...

He rode through the night with the thought: 'Mine, mine — I have done this to her...'

Sary was not at her selection, but had gone to Tharlane, twenty miles away.

It was nearly three o'clock before he swung her from the folded blanket behind him, and the frightened horse plunged away in the dark. Martha was some time dead.

Later the old woman said to him, in a broken whisper, laying one big timid hand on his shoulder as he crouched at the door (thinking about another hand with no one to comfort it): 'Your baby, Sandy... It's alive! You aren't lost everything, Sandy.' Whereat, suddenly startled from apathy as one hearing some frightful, incredible thing, he turned upon her, using fierce, brutal, profane words that made her cower and hastily cover the small bundle in her arms which she had brought to him as solace — failing to understand that it was to him only the cross that upheld him to the agony of life.

Stumbling away through the dark with his face against his arm, he whispered, tasting the last dregs of pain: 'I carn' even go to you, love... Oh, love, I thought I coulda went.'

PART SIX

XXV

In the remote lands men labour mightily, but they do not hurry as a rule. There is abundant time. A day may be as endless as the years, years short as a day. The little things become great things, the great things small with familiarity. To-day's vast fierce sunshine is the same as to-morrow's, to-morrow's as yesterday's.

It is hard to mark the years and the weeks, hard to remember wars and deeds of nations on which the sun looks when the stars come, but all men knew that, in the year after 'Sandy's wife was took,' Donald the Shearer was left 'a load of furnitchy' by an aunt of his mother's, and that the next year, when his new house on the creek above Tharlane was finished, he sent for it. When it came, rumour held, it was in two large vans, laden with store assistants, and, when Donald shook a chair in lifting it, he was buried so deeply in 'borer beetles' that it took all his famed strength to save him from suffocation... And he refused to take delivery of the rest of the furniture in a manner which the store proprietors described as 'needlessly and libellously offensive'; they further stated that the borers had been in the 'articles in question' for years, of which fact Donald said that it was a pity they had not informed him before they sent them out, as if they imagined that his financial position was such that he could contemplate with equanimity 'two mammoth vans and half a score of strapping louts engaged in giving a load of borers a joy-ride across Queensland,' they were mistaken...

That year men said also that Sandy were not 'coming back again no more'... And in this year also Old Luther the Teamster cut the corners out of a flour bag and wore it under his trousers — because he was still unable to remember to take them to Mrs. Barwon to mend... In this year, too, the Great War ended, and Mrs. MacSpee, who — her own time for children being past — was caring for Sandy's little daughter, had the infant christened in case she was 'struck down.'

Next year the Drover Abel put some of his land under a new kind of wheat and would have cleared 'near two hundred pounds' if the hail had not spoilt it.

And then Donald the Shearer shot a white kangaroo...

Time was both short and endless. Short because men died with work half finished, or found unexpectedly that angina pectoris or consumption born of the dust or the mere passing of the days wrote 'No' across the work so planned for to-morrow. Endless because there was little to cut one day from the next, or change a thought to new thought, and the thoughts ran on with the days...

Men had time to dream and remember, and time for black hating.

About Sandy, long-wanderer, the Northern Plains rolled in dark semi-barren grandeur to the night-shadowed sky as deeply green as far water, lit with orange along the horizon line where low butts humped about the lights of a little town.

Within the sky, where fierce orange and deep translucent green were mated, hung a slender gold thread of a moon and a splendid star...

He had seen the lights of the town in the first dusk, and now they were like a little star flock resting in the dark, fierce shelter of the flat-topped stone hills.

An hour's riding had brought him seemingly no closer across the vast dark mystery of the plain. At first he had believed himself but a few miles from the tiny settlement with its light-stars, but had discovered that a trail of nearer lights, not of the town, were moving toward it along the same road as he. He wondered idly what they were — a glow-worm trail moving over vast darkness under a great green bowl lipped with sullen fire of afterglow...

Insects crawling through darkness under indifference... from little pain to other little pain that he despised: from or to joys that he hated as the exiled hate.

He was sick of men, resentful of life and living. Resentful of memory. Hating life for its cruelty; men for their hope or joy; love for the pain it had brought him.

His horse moved softly through cushioned dust. All across the hot night plains the crickets sang.

He said, as he had said a hundred times: 'I won't never go back — I sends money enough for It.'

New places bury old pain!

He said, as he had said a hundred times: 'Mother MacSpee are good with children — an' what could I do with a child?... An' — *I'm done with troublin'*.'

Crying fiercely to Life: 'You have hurt me too much!' Defying Life — who may not hurt those who do not care. Glad of the strength of hating.

... And now above the sounds of crickets came a running and silver pricking of fairy bells, jingling,

blending, dying, ringing out again!... And he saw that he was close upon a dusty caravan, where lanterns orange and white and red swung from strange covered wagons, with warm pink flushings of light gleaming eerily through their wooden ribs and canvas skin.

About the wagons and the queer closed vans flowed a weary tide of hungry little ponies, piebald and skewbald and black, their little bells ringing a tinkling silver music which belied their little weary feet and hungry eyes!

... And the years moved back, and Sandy felt again, for a moment, the excitement of that night a thousand miles away down this same great road when for the first time he had known that he beheld a circus!

As he was fairly amongst them, the circus wagons scattered along a small dusty-banked bore drain, where, with shoutings of men and jinglings of harness, they were prepared for camp. The little ponies ran down to the tepid ribbon of reflected stars and drank eagerly and hurried out on little tired feet to look for grass, and found none, and came back to drink again — in the hope of quenching hunger also.

Sandy sat darkly silent upon his horse, and saw the cooking-fires spring up, and, as on that other time, no one noticed him!

From the nearest canvas-covered wagon a woman brought sticks to her fire — for there was no wood on the plains and they who wanted fuel must carry it... And presently, as she fed the flame and put on the coffee and grilled the bacon, Sandy knew, through all her wrinkles, where had once been artificial pink-and-

white, that she was the woman who had shown him the lion!

She was very feeble, and one side of her face was disfigured by a scar, but she hurried about her preparations and seemed pleased with the way the bacon was cooking, and when she stirred the condensed milk into the coffee, she hurriedly sipped a little from the spoon and then glanced over her shoulder. Presently a man whom Sandy also remembered, and whose smile had once fallen so suddenly from his face, came into the firelight and stretched his heavy body on the earth. The woman moved even faster now as she served him, and he took the bacon and seemed pleased with it and then called for the coffee, and, as the woman ran with it, she tripped and spilt it at his feet, and Sandy saw the fear leap up in her eyes!

So he rode out into the light and asked how far it was to the town, and the man's heavy face was at once wreathed in laughter and he said that 'the old woman had upset the drink,' but that accidents would happen, and Sandy saw the pink come into the woman's withered cheeks as she ran to get the new coffee, while she said that it 'wouldn't take a minute,' and that there hadn't been any sugar in the lot that had upset and not much milk either! And the big man said grandly that it wouldn't matter if she upset a tank of milk — and he smiled showing yellow teeth in very pink gums. Whereat the woman said quickly that of course she knew he wouldn't have minded and that she had only been joking! But her hands shook so that Sandy lifted the next lot of coffee from the fire for her. Then, in response to the man's invitation, he said that he would not eat, and after he

had listened to the man's stories until the man's laughter at his own jokes had a different sound, Sandy rode away.

... And although twice he halted, and although his face was still shadowed with a darkness that was not all the night's, a harsh and bitter thing within him seemed softened somehow. His own fate in some degree less fearful.

Sullenly, unwillingly, Sandy rode back whence he had come — away from the sinking moon.

The sound of the little bells died down behind him, ringing their silver lies at the very edge of sound, and then were swallowed by the plain...

Thus, four years after Martha's death, Sandy came back to Murgan, on some such night of muffling blue-white dust and far afterglow as that upon which, long ago, he had first seen the circus lights and heard the little tinkling bells come down the great road.

The goats had gone to bed in musky, huddled groups about the fence corners and against the iron goods-shed; blots of orange light marked the windows, golden bars of light fell from the doorways across the trampled dust of earth verandahs.

Sandy rode slowly, for the thought of returning to the child he had seen only for a little moment through a mist of such agony, and who had been merely the thing which upheld him to the pain of living, contained very little joy. He did not want to talk to people or to answer questions, and so he rode past the hotels with their gossiping idlers and out along the road that led by the railway tracks to Mrs. MacSpee's house. For Mrs. MacSpee was no longer cooking at Tharlane, but had bought the Murgan Bakery

— where, report had it, she worked even harder than heretofore in the attempt to support James MacSpee her spouse.

By the open Common the light was stronger, and on an old fall-splintered box log Sandy saw a small fat child sitting. A little girl, grave and plump and wide-eyed. It was a long time since he had stopped to talk to a child, but he stopped now — because he did not want to hurry.

'Good-night,' said Sandy.

'Good-night,' said the little girl, sitting if anything more firmly on the log. 'It's very hot to-day, the amomiter stood at a frousand in the shade!' This surprising information she imparted with a polite conversational intonation, seemingly incompatible with her size, but obviously demanding a high level of effort on Sandy's part.

'I hope we have rain soon,' said he gravely.

'I have almost forgotted what rain is like,' said she of the fat four-year-old legs. 'Won't you tit down?'

Sandy climbed off his horse and seated himself on the broad surface of the log. 'You may,' his hostess added graciously, 'smoke if you cares to. I don't find it 'fect me in the oping air.'

Than this there was no greater social polish attainable in the West! And, indeed, about the whole small maid there was a certain definite independence and maturity most arresting — and yet it was a very small maiden! And the disturbing thought came to Sandy that it is in a hard school that maturity is attained most rapidly...

Sandy thanked her, and as he lighted his pipe she noticed his bandaged hand — scratched by a branch: 'Dear me, you've cut yourself! I hope you haven't

let it get seplic! I lost my third youngest with a seplic toe,' she said with genteel melancholy. 'He was a lovely child 'til he trod on the rusty nail, an' then he turned blue and red and yellow; it was very sad!'

'It must have been!' said he, puffing at his pipe in the shelter of his hand — while memory plucked at him.

'Yes,' said the bereaved parent. 'But only a mother understands... Are you a mother yourself?'

He said that he was not, but implied that he nevertheless deeply sympathized with her loss. She shook her infant head: and said, in a tone that came back to Sandy out of the past when Mother MacSpee had sped rosily about the Tharlane camp-fires telling of the ten graves she had mothered, and the truly surprising ills which had filled them, a tone stirring his heart to wild beating, flooding his soul with shame and laughter that was close to tears:

'Until you have *laid one away*, you don't know what it is to be a *mother*... I have lost *ten* myself... an',' she said with mild reproach, '*my husband wouldn't even pay for their interrings!* My first little girl was always weakly... She was born without a somick — an' for all my care that made it *hard*...!' she sighed.

Sandy said thickly, 'Who taught you to talk that way?... I mean, where do you live?'

She answered in innocent childish treble: 'I live with Mrs. MacSpee. She is very good to I, for I be a great 'sponsibility an' trial, an' she tries to be a mother to I. I am very nungrateful too; an' if my dead mother in the grave thirty miles away nunder a real white marble monnyment that Mrs. MacSpee goes to

twice a year an' washes as if it was her own mother lyin' there was to rise an' see me, she would blush with shame.' Her voice became personal and confiding: 'I also goes to sleep sometimes ninstead of nundressing myself.'

He covered his face with his hands, and tears ran between his fingers and glimmered in the last deep light. She apparently suspected that he, too, must have the same dark, hidden fault.

She said sternly but justly: 'Of course we should bemember not to when so much is done for we.'

Then there stirred in her that world-old sympathy that exists between sinners, also desire for a slight vindication, and slipping from the great log she stood minutely and chubbily by his side and said: 'Don't cry! An' it *is* hard to 'member when you're asleep.' He raised his face and they smiled at each other.

'You can carry me home,' she decreed graciously, '... like Donald the Shearer does sometimes... *Two* times he's carried me now... last Christmas and this Christmas; I liked it, and so did he: it was *very nice!* Donald the Shearer is one of my ol'est friends.'

He put his great hands about her small, pudgy, delightful body and swung her to his shoulder, where her chubby, grubby, small legs brushed his cheek. Above them the stars were coming out and from across the Common came the scent of dried grass and everlasting-flowers, and in his heart was now a joy that became so wild and sweet that it was pain, and now a shame that passed to such tenderness that it, too, became almost joy.

She said, holding by his hair, little feet tapping and wriggling against his chest: 'I bath myself in the washing water when the washing is finished. I bath

myself *very well!* For children should be nin'erpendent... *All* myself is very clean — escept the bit I can't reach — it may be a little soiled, I think.'

He said unsteadily: 'Why, bless me, I must stop a bit. I've got something in my eyes again...'

'I hope,' remarked his companion, 'that it's nothing ser'us. My fifth little daughter that died of——'

He said: 'Shall we talk about some one that didn't die for a little while?'

'Yes — but we must all lie down to res' at last...' She said piously, and then brightened: 'My father sends me lots and lots of things for Christmas — and Donald the Shearer brings them! An' he had to go away to make moneys, my father... He didn't not want I, an' Mrs. MacSpee only *thought* so! For he told Donald the Shearer that he liked having a little girl — *more than n'anything at all!* You must not verpeat this, but Donald says that Mrs. MacSpee is a gabbling 'potamus... I'm *afraid*,' she added, 'that it was rather rude of him to talk like that about a mother who's still taken in a orfing... Oh! You musn' hold I like that; I a bit soft, *in places*... Oh, that tickles...!'

He pressed his lips over her face and hair and soft round cheeks and slim neck, and whispered as a lover might:

'Would you come away with me, little small un an' we'll forget all about orphans an' graves an' Mrs. MacSpee?'

She considered, curled grave and warm in his arms.

'Yes — but you musn' kiss; I tickly... I don't *really* care for it... You aren't very angry now?'

And as they went on, he asked: 'What do they call you?'

'Armistice,' she said.

He whispered: 'Oh, God forgive me!'

Then he added: ''S'pose we change it to Chum?'

XXVI

Old H. B. was seventy-five, and was having his pants put on.

His youngest assistant heaved violently. There was no visible result. On his knees the young man braced himself for further efforts... His kindly face crimsoning with exertion, he lifted with a careful, wriggling motion: in vain.

Looking up into the bronzed, bulging, somewhat satanic countenance above him, he muttered with respectful despair, 'They seem a little tight, Mister Henrics!'

Old H. B. gave a grunt of all-embracing scorn and endeavoured to see over his own person to the corduroy breeches at which the youth hove. He then remarked, with noticeable absence of that tender gratitude which the aged and infirm are supposed to exhibit toward those who tend them, 'H'any one but a blanky h'ass would 'a' 'ad 'em h'on two hour ago.'

... At last, apparelled in vast, rather soiled tan shirt, buff corduroy breeches, blood-coloured leather leggins, and boots with heavy silver spurs, his hat uptilting and adorned with a tuft of emu plumes, Old H. B., weighing now twenty-six stone ten, went forth into the sunshine. Master of Tharlane and The Block; owner of a hundred and ten thousand heavy-fleeced merino sheep, and nine thousand square-framed, heavy-jowled, red polled Angus cattle — the richest man in the West!

He saw his pure-bred Frisian milking herd wandering in black-and-white content to the troughs, where

parrots, grey and pink, green and crimson, blue and amber, dropped shrieking to water... In their netted breeding-pens his Indian games strutted with warlike golden eyes and bulging thighs and breasts, and his soft-feathered Orpingtons fussed and toddled. In larger yards lived the cross-bred descendants of Orpington and game, wide-breasted, glossy black and gleaming of feather, strong of leg and keen of eye...

His thirty-foot windmill wheel on its eighty-foot metal tower — the biggest mill in the West — lifted water for the great oleander bushes and dark green deciduous cedars about the white-painted homestead buildings. The red dust between the trees and flowering bushes was lace-patterned by the rosy feet of the crested pigeons and tiny ringdoves... And single oleander flowers, white and pale shell colour, fell to it with murdered or murmurous bees still prisoned in them.

Blue, infinitely domestic, smoke rose from the kitchen chimney, blue smoke from the fires under the great pot by the wood-heap, where kangaroo meat was stewing for the dogs and fowls, blue smoke from the always smouldering rubbish-heaps about the kennels and yards... All was drowned in the vastness of heat... All was sleepy with content... Old H. B. looked upon his work and found it good!

He was well content with all the years of work — only last month he had evolved a method whereby men mounted upon puffing grubbing-tractors could roll down the grey mulga scrub to feed the sheep in drought time... Always before it had been cut with an axe, but the average axeman could feed only a thousand sheep a day in the best cutting, while a man on a tractor, equipped with Old H. B.'s perfected

bumpers, could roll down fodder enough for seven thousand in a day!

... All his world was good — and yet he sighed, tilting a diminutive cigarette against the evil, truculent protuberance of his lower lip... Then with a little stick he began to draw in the dust — shaping the outlines of Tharlane and The Block.

'H'if h'I 'ad another seventy years, h'I'd show men 'ow to work this country!'

Standing in the sun, he looked back across a thousand victories of the earth-battle, and, looking forward, hated death that was the end of battling... Still, seventy-five was not so old!

And, as always, the thought of the soil made him drunk... He snorted — and yet what better thing was there for a man to spend his days in than the working of the soil? Wars of nations pass, and that which one age held glorious the next holds futile. But in the battle with the land, no victory was ever won in vain, nor courage poured at the feet of a fading shibboleth. For the contest is timeless and eternal. Very war of life against death! War which must be waged so long as through act of man a seed is sown or a lamb born and tended!

That spring Old H. B. was fifty thousand pounds in debt again, for he had bought Arteran's Land! And the next year he had spent another fifty thousand on its improvement! And the next year he had made only a slight recovery, for he decided that it was bad economy to use petrol pumps — save as auxiliaries — on the majority of his wells and installed thirteen windmills.

Mrs. Henrics said that he would be in a pauper's grave before he died.

He himself, feeling rheumatic pains and shortness of breath, said (not to his spouse, but to that land which, could he now have climbed the eagle's rock, had lain amber and grey, lilac and silver, to the skirts of the sky — *all his!*), 'Soon I'll play safe, me love!'

XXVII

Because, by the time she was ten years old, Chum so loved the tiny tin-horned gramophone at Murgers' Bar, Sandy, on an afternoon of early spring, worked with particular earnestness over the 'Profit and Loss Accounts' of his books. He sat where the sun struck through the uncurtained window and lit his great bent neck and superb shoulders as he leaned above the table and laboriously proved, beyond all doubting, that which he had already known — namely, that the loss had absorbed all profits of this as of most other years.

'I don't know why a man's such a hope-drunk fool as to look over his 'counts,' said Donald the Shearer, who sat on the doorstep whittling a trigger-pull for a spring-gun. 'That's where the man o' eddication scores,' he added, looking up with eyes neither whose laughter nor truculence the years had dimmed, while he pushed up wild grey hair with the back of his hand. 'The man o' eddication as is selecting on the land, Sandy, me lad, can tell as he's in debt an' always will be without more 'an a glance, but it takes us poor innocents weeks o' countin' on our fingers an' stirring o' our hair afore we gets to the same state! Waste o' brain power it is, I tell thee! A castin' away o' precious time as we might be gettin' deeper in debt in! A ——'

'We made a real good profit last year, Chum an' me,' said Sandy slowly. 'After we'd paid the carriage an' the scouring an' the rent, we still had twenty pound clear — though, of course, we had to put it back in a new shed.'

Donald rose gravely: 'May I shake your hand, friend? May I congratulate o' you befittingly?... I haven't made a profit that you'd notice since nineteen-ten! — But can we hear what you hove sech a sigh about — when you found you couldn't get it? Remember, I regards you paternal like, Sandy, lad!'

Sandy's dreams did not flow as readily in speech as did the other's. He spoke slowly and self-consciously:

'I'd thought about a gramophone for Chum.'

'They do be powerful bright sweet instruments,' said Donald. 'My neighbour-to-the-west, the Drover Abel Crosset, bought one the year before last when he sold his fat cow... cost him over two pound, as I'm remembering! After a while, though, it wouldn't slow down nohow — a wagon brake wouldn' have stopped it, nor a Westinghouse! But he takes what you might call a bright view o' everything, do my neighbour-to-the-west! "Once you're used to it, it's real cheerful, Donald, the pace the old girl goes at," says he to me. "You could dance to the Funeral March when she's done with it." Still, I must say meself I prefers their progress more moderated... Why, bless me, why don't you get a manjoline, Son Sandy?' he added, as one who has suddenly solved a friend's problem.

And strumming on his gun-trigger, he sang in a tremendous baritone:

'The night too quickly passes,
And we are growing old!
So let us fill our glasses,
And toast the Days of Gold!'

'I can't play,' said Sandy. 'An' I can't afford it, anyhow.'

'No,' agreed Donald...

'The stately ships came sailing
From every harbour's mouth,
They sought the land of promise
That beaconed in the South...

'So far as that goes, I should rightly say, if you'll pardon a old friend, as you shouldn' get anything afore you gets a warm coat. A warm coat I've always held to be a necesserty preëminent — if that be the word?' said he, whose own old and threadbare garment was the joke of the shearing-sheds (albeit a very private jest, owing to the length of its owner's arm and the weight of his fist). 'It be very sad to have no command o' words, Sandy, boy! No flow o' speech to mirror a man's thought! Or give back the glory o' th' world by telling o' it! No words to speak the sweet o' love! No...' His golden tongue rolled on, the 'manjoline' forgotten, weaving, as he had ever been able to weave, stars and sun, love and laughter, with the tales of his telling. But he had planted the seeds of temptation.

'I will be goin' on me path,' he said presently. 'I haven't seen Georgina the Mother for six long weeks! ... But I'll be back to undress Old H. B.'s lambs in January — an' I plan to visit you an' all me friends, to bid you the time o' day an' luck o' th' year!'

That night, had Donald not been jogging miles away under the stars toward his love, he might have seen Sandy bending superb strength above an absurdly inadequate pen as he very carefully filled in one of those sirens of the modern world — a coupon which carried 'no obligation.'

Wherefore, some months later, ten-year-old Chum,

coming up from turning out the cow, found Sandy sitting on the step with a strange, shining stringed instrument in his hands, and could she have seen for the deep dusk, she would have noticed that his face was flushed and his hands unsteady.

Chum seated herself firmly on the step below, and with chin in hands and feet apart, asked: 'What have you got there, Sandy?'

Lightly, resolutely, he began to play. Triumphantly, exultantly, he played to the coming stars in the vast sky and to Chum. But, oh, alas, for the rhythmless of the earth! There broke upon the startled night and upon little tuneful Chum such a strange crying and wailing and shrilling, such meaningless ups and downs and shakings and quaverings and wild flights of sound as seldom small girl nor ancient night had heard before. It pierced Chum's being, it tore at the sensitive nerves of hearing, the delicate dancing cadences of her brain.

But Chum was brave.

Her laughter, clear and deep and sweet, as was her unmodulated speech — so strangely compounded of Mrs. MacSpee's and the shearer men's — rose in a cascade of valiant silver above the horror of Sandy's playing of the mandolin.

'Naughty Sandy... Whose is it?' said Chum, and like a wounded thing the fearful melody fell stricken about her laughter.

He put the mandolin on his knee and, while the hot tides ran up his neck and brow, said hoarsely in bitter shame: 'I bought it' — and then shame conquered truth and he muttered '... for Jimmy Elgin.' But his reluctant fingers still closed lovingly about the thing that had betrayed him.

Chum said: 'Jimmy come back to-day. I see the smoke of his fire to-night — maybe he'll come round an' you can give it to him.'

Sandy answered, 'Yes, I can give it to him'; and very softly put down the mandolin on the step.

It was quite dark now. Presently Chum went clopping into the house to finish the washing-up. Sandy heard her moving about the dining-room, then in his room putting out his things for the night... Suddenly, with rushing clap of boots, she was back on the step, her breath coming so fast that she could hardly speak.

'Sandy, *don't* give it to Jimmy — *let's keep it!*... You'd play it *lovely* in a little while! *Promise you won't give it away!*'

He said, 'But I thought as you didn't like it...'

She rushed over him: 'Oh, *do! do!* keep it, Sandy ... You could play allers in the evening! *Do* keep it! Don't give it to Jimmy!' She put her little hard thin arms about his knees and leant her head on them, and through his old moles he felt her hot tears.

'Don't cry, Chummy,' whispered Sandy. ''Course we'll keep it! Why are you cryin'?'

'I aren't sech a fool as to cry!' said Chum fiercely. 'An' don't you say so!' But she still wept; with hard, fierce little sobs.

He bent closer and whispered: 'Chummy, dear, it were really meant for to play to you — I didn' buy it for Jimmy! I been *learnin'* to play it for you!'

She raised a rapturous, incredulous face. 'Aw, Sandy, to play to me?'

Later she very carefully slipped back into the bottom of his drawer a much-thumbed copy of 'Delight the Family — How to Become a Master Musician

in Your Own Home' — a copy found only by what Chum called the 'bitest of luck.'

'Terrible chancy things happen!' said ten-year-old Chum. 'You have to keep your peepers open.'

XXVIII

In January, Donald the Shearer came back to 'undress' his lambs and, collecting a letter for Sary Strathmore, he turned from his way to deliver it and 'gossip the news.'

Donald knew all the news... Mrs. Barwon was not drunk quite so often... Mrs. Flanery had buried her eleventh baby... There were three thousand cattle coming through from the Cooper... Donald the Shearer's neighbour-to-the-west, Drover Abel Crosset's wheat had failed for four successive years and the work was generally 'a little ahead of him.'

In spite of all these things he was always very sure that the wheat would not fail next year, nor the flies come, nor the dingoes be troublesome...

'He do always take a bright view, do my neighbour-to-the-west, the Drover Abel Crosset,' said Donald the Shearer. 'I suppose it do help a man to be cheerful, livin' always on the land wi' the sun an' the wind ... But yet there's no finer stuff made into men, an' 'twould seem his wheat might have grown once wi'out hurtin' th' universe...'

It is not correct to open at once even a letter that may be the only letter of the year — apart from governmental circulars — and which sets up a whole train of thought as to who could possibly have written it and why. But, although she was too well-bred to open the letter he had brought her, Sary's attention was not wholly given to Donald's stories of the Drover Abel and the other identities of the West.

The gold of afternoon flooded the slab huts and

the clean fowl-yards. A late thunderhead rolled majestically up the southern sky above the low brown-grassed slope of Turkey Rise. Pigeons called monotonously...

The storm seemed to grow momentarily darker and more superbly purple. Then it greyed with blurs of remote rain, and suddenly across the whole arch of the southern sky there formed a mighty rainbow — aflame with glory!

Now the extending cloud-bank to the west threw the world into shadow and only the great bow burned divinely in the storm-torn sky, seeming almost to reflect itself in the grey-shadowed hill-slope.

'... If any man deserved to find the pot o' gold at the rainbow-foot it were Drover Abel Crosset, my neighbour-to-the-west,' said Donald, slowly refilling his pipe. 'An' he be seventy-two an' he knows th' rain'll come right time next year...'

But Sary was turning her letter over, trying not to want to open it. Suddenly she got up, hurried inside, and put it on the mantelpiece where it would be out of sight and mind, then came back and sat down to enjoy the chat, for, after all, although the letter was such a baffling mystery, it would wait, and to talk with some one was a rare thing; also she wanted to tell Donald about the 'bullicks.'

'... It's taken me longer 'an I expected to get them ready for selling, what with poor seasons an' things ...They be just turned twelve year old now,' she said hesitantly when it was possible to introduce the subject without rudeness. 'They were forward-stores here, but I were advised to send them down onto the Downs to get their last fatting... They're just *prime* now...'

'Why, Sary Strathmore, you'll be a rich woman not speaking to us poor selectors as you rolls past in your Ford,' said Donald. 'Come, now, Sary, shall we elope? Wi' our good looks an' your fortune ——'

'Shust!' said Sary, blushing. Then with dreamy pause she said: 'I'm going to build a new room! An' I *are* going to buy a Ford!... An' new curtains!... I hav' been a bit nervous lately, too,' she added. 'You see, we mayn't see no one here for two months on end, an' if my horse should fall on me or I broke me leg out fencing, it'd be weeks afore any one knew — an' whatever'd have become of Denny an' Perkins? Now I'll get the telephone an' tell the post-office if I don't ring for a few days to send out — nothin' much could happen to the boys in a day or so.' Her voice grew hushed. 'Think, Donald! As prices is, them cattle is worth *five thousand pound!*' She looked dazed, then laughed. 'It aren't good to think about it,' said Sary. 'Will you stay to tea, Donald?'

He rose, stalwart and alert. 'No, thank you, Sary — I promised to go see Sandy an' Chum... Good luck, Sary, with them bullicks! An' a kiss to bind it!' cried he, but Sary blushed and jerked away, saying, 'Shust, Donald!'

He had ridden only a few hundred yards into the storm-dusk when he heard her screaming. Leaping from the old staid horse, he ran as he had never run even in the days of his hunting... Near the gate he met her coming blindly, as though drunk, and screaming of something that was 'gone.' He thought her snake-bitten, but in one large hand she held, crushed, the letter he had brought her and, although her trembling mouth could form no words, she pointed to the letter and pushed it almost into his

face! Holding her on one arm, he took the torn pages in his free hand and read:

'DEAR MADAM, it is our duty to inform you that the cattle, viz: five hundred red bald-faced bullocks branded D.05 on the rear ribs and ear-marked with halfpenny out of bottom of off ear, depasturing upon the property of Edward Rankine, Esq., have been taken over by us as part liquidation of his indebtedness (see bankruptcy notices in the —— of ——). Our mortgage agreement was couched in the usual terms of a complete cover, viz: that we had first claim upon all land and improvements held by the bankruptee *and also all stock depasturing upon such lands*. We have the honour to regretfully inform you that such an agreement as this is absolutely binding at law and that any efforts on your part to recover the said cattle will of necessity be useless. (Refer to similar cases —— versus —— in 19..., and —— versus —— in 19....) We deeply regret any inconvenience caused you. We are, madam, your obedient servants ——'

Sary wrenched from Donald's supporting arm and looked into his face — and now there was no thought of midnight ride to set his eyes adancing as there had been when once he took home to Sary a draft mare 'strayed' out on The Block. Now there was no old marauding horsethief to deal with, but a great company whose mortgages were 'binding at law!' He did not speak, but she cried: 'You liar, it aren't true!' Then she burst into wild laughter, and from her lips there broke wilder torrents of profanity: she shook her worn huge hands to the sky and cursed God. Then she fell on her face in the dust, cutting her lips, and the dust stuck to her wet cheeks...

Much later she said: 'Go 'long, Donald — I'd sooner be by meself a bit — I'm 'right now.'

But the next day and the next, Sary's white ducks padded hopefully to their feeding-tins, and rattled and dibbled their bills on the bottom... and waited awhile and then went keeling away again, talking loudly of the strange thing that had befallen!

On the third day, however, Sary came out with the feed-baskets and clicked her tongue in self-reproach at sight of the little pleated hunger-fold that ran down each ducky breast.

XXIX

Old H. B., without quite knowing why he did it, gave Captain and Mate — more generally known as 'the Fossils' — the contract for the subdivision fence in the Tharlane Spell Paddock.

The two Fossils were very, very old — and somehow belated: doddering along after their generation had passed and left them; telling stories that had been told out when men now grown were children. Even Old H. B. admitted to himself that his employment of them was in part sentiment — and then Mate and Captain were so comically alike that the mere sight of them rippled his great stomach with laughter.

Each was tall and incredibly thin, brown and withered; each wore a long, drooping moustache, and his hair rather long, and a hat old past belief, and a blue mole shirt very faded by much washing in clay-thick water and long exposure to the sun. Each hitched his trousers-tops where common men wear the seat, so that these garments remaining on at all was a source of wonder, even to Old H. B. — the adherence of whose own trousers puzzled all beholders. Captain was a shade whiter of hair and a shade pinker of skin than Mate, while his big thin hands showed the corrosion of a sun whose ultra-violet rays give men cancer, and will turn a white glass bottle lying on a rubbish-heap for a few years to a deep lovely purple.

Captain was also slightly more irascible than Mate.

They spoke to each other in deep, bellowing notes, having got the habit from many years of conversing down some hundreds of feet of fence line, and every-

thing of interest that was told to the one, he promptly repeated to the other, who in turn might repeat it back again.

Thus, when Old H. B. offered them the contract, Mate bellowed to Captain, 'He'll give twenty pound a mile, for four-inch pony posts in twelve-foot panels run wi' five wire.' And Captain, who had heard the original offer as he stood at Mate's elbow, bellowed back, 'Twenty a mile, four-inch posts in twelve-foot panels, run wi' five wire'; and Mate said, 'Aye, Lad.' The price was a perfectly fair one, but Mate added, 'We're being done, Lad'; and Captain cried, 'We're being done.'

By those who did not know them, they were taken always for brothers, with perhaps four years between them: they were in truth father and son, Captain having begat Mate, with some partner and at a time which no one remembered. According to the men of the West, they had always 'stuck around together.'

As they lived always in their tents, they had brought the equipment of their camp to a singular perfection of comfort. Their stretchers, their tools, their scrupulously clean pots and gridirons, had in the main been with them for a generation, and as their portable home came to rest, each found its particular place. They even carried a broom, and swept their everchanging back yard.

Having accepted Old H. B.'s contract, they pitched camp in a sandalwood scrub, at the back of the Spell Paddock Tank, and composed themselves for a few weeks' rest before starting the fence.

Their conversation consisted of reminiscences, tempered by mild, but more or less continual, mutual criticism.

When the last sunlight made beautiful the desolate trampled box flat about the tank, and gilded the high-piled grey-white earth of the tank banks, they would see the slow roan and white and red cattle coming in, and perhaps some of Old H. B.'s new Frisian milkers; and then, as the world beneath the trees grew luminous grey with twilight and away to the west, between the dark green of the box-tree tops, the sky grew amber and then wine colour, and the smoke from the cooking fire was frail pure blue, they saw the grey and red and velvet blue kangaroos coming in, singly or in little groups... And the big heavy-flying bronze-wing pigeons.

With rather tremulous hands they prepared savory stews of potatoes and onions and beef — stews which took hours both to get ready and simmer...

According to their own ideals, Mate and Captain were happy. Through the night they slept the light but untroubled sleep of the very old.

Every day they decided to start work to-morrow.

Then, on one of his early water-getting expeditions, Mate saw a big red dingo which flashed up the earthen slope on the farther side of the tank — and away! On their next store trip they somewhat unthinkingly reported this to Old H. B., and promptly brought him out to pick up its track, and incidentally to see how the new fence was getting on.

After that, Mate and Captain had to fell a few posts every day, but still they managed to enjoy the autumn weather until attracted by Old H. B.'s proffered reward Donald the Shearer, Young Donald, and Chum came out to hunt the dog.

For Donald's home was 'only thirty miles' from Sandy's, and on his hunting expeditions the Shearer

often took Chum along, together with some member of his own vast brood.

... Beside a small supper fire under dark trees they planned their campaign: the firelight flickering on Chum's sturdy little brows, The Shearer's wild silver hair, and Young Donald's dark eyes.

'You can camp where you like, Donald...' said Chum, shrilly addressing the elder of that name. 'I'm going down under the big broken box tree at the east of the flat, and I'm going to howl him up and blow his head off before you get your eyes open!'

Donald sat with one hand resting easily on each wide powerful knee, his wide face turning attentively at times towards the encircling scrub.

'We'll depend on th' guns to-night... We won't have no chance with the rifles, Me Chicks,' he said. 'But we may get a go at him with the "Savage" at daylight... if you aren't got 'im knockin' at Peter's Gate afore, begging your pardon, Chummy!'

Chum grinned, but the boy's eyes flared angrily: 'You needn't laugh at Chum's shootin'!'

'We better go first and tell Mate and Captain not to shoot at a howl,' said Chum, ignoring her champion, 'or they might get one of us.'

'They might,' Donald corroborated. 'They might ... There'd be no risk in daylight if they could see to aim at us — but at night — who knows?'

At Mate and Captain's camp their reception was cold. Mate said that it took brains to catch a dingo, and Captain said that save for an unfortunate intervention on the part of people, in his opinion highly unlikely to catch even domestic dogs, he, Captain, would have had the dingo that very night — having

been merely getting his eye in heretofore! Now, however, he put away his very old thirty-two rifle (whose sights he had been unable to see for many years) and went to bed; saying that the opportunities for any reasonable person getting the dog had been blighted by certain 'galloping idiots in Ford's motor cars.'

Donald the Man's wide mouth, with its bent pipe hanging from the strong worn teeth, showed for a moment in the lights as he regarded Chum, while avowing his own intention of spending the night in a forked mulga by the pad along the new fence, and further suggesting that they pool the reward amongst the three of them, no matter which of them actually shot the dog.

'If you should want me now, Chummy, give three howls, and one, and three,' he enjoined her.

Donald the Boy asked, hesitantly, 'Would you like *me* to stick around not too far off, Chummy?'

''Course I wouldn't!'

Chum carefully gathered up her blankets, then trudged back to the Forked Roads and took the one to the east of the flat... There, beneath a big box tree, she deposited her small swag, gun, and rifle.

The bush about her was full of sounds; the darkness intense.

Chum settled at the foot of the tree, arranged some branches so that they screened her from view, placed the gun to her hand, and prepared to wait for the moon...

The sounds were legion; now the soft calling of duck in the tank, the slow thudding of an old man kangaroo, the deliberate walk of a mob of horses coming down to water. And, woven around and about

these individual sounds, a multitude of little movements and scuffles and whispering footsteps.

Presently the dead mulgas against the east grew sharp on the lightening sky, and then the orange disc of the moon came up. At first only the tips of the trees caught its light, but gradually the radiance crept down and down, and bared the dusty earth, and as the moon rose higher its face lost its glowing orange and became cold and glittering silver on the deep, cold, cloudless sky.

Chum shivered in her blanket, partly with cold and partly because of the exciting living bush about her.

When she thought the light good enough, she threw back her small brown head and howled long and clear, with the shrill, lonely insistence of the mate-hunting dog. She was very proud of her howling, and, although she had never heard of it, she utilized suggestion... You wanted to really think you were a dog, Chum thought, a dog running and running, and wanting another dog, with panting tongue and warm flank and rank fur! If you tried to force out a howl, it was all wrong; you just needed to think you were a dog and throw back your head and lift your nose to the moon and sing and sing about your doggy loneliness...

Once, after twenty minutes of alternate howling and listening, she heard the dingo answer her, far and shrill!

'I wish there was two dogs,' said Chum to the moon. 'I wants to get one... but I wants *him* to get one, too!'

Growing unbearably chilly, she drew all her blankets about her and lay down with her hands under her head. The blankets were deliciously warm

and a glow of secret comfort swept up her; it made one feel clever somehow to be the only warm, comfortable thing in all the great frosty night...

She woke with a jerk, and a terrifying sense of overwhelming imminent sound, which had ceased by the time she was fully awake. For a moment she lay quite still looking up at the great broken branch against the stars above her, her heart beating a wild tattoo; then a few yards away the dingo howled with deep-mouthed, vibrating shrillness... Chum sat up very suddenly, and saw the big dog sitting in the clear light of the setting moon, about ten feet from the screen of branches! And even as she looked he began to run: swift and low to the ground.

By the time she had her gun up, he was a full twenty yards away and in checkered shadow... She hesitated, and saw her chance go! And then did a shameful thing: fired when she knew it was too late!

Hot tears of shame and disappointment blinded her! Shame beyond expression broke hotly across her small body. If only she had not gone to sleep; if only she had not sat up like a frightened fool! Above all, if she had not fired!

In the moments which followed the crash of her gun, Chum saw her life ruined, respectable hunters refusing to take her on the same trips with them; telling with mockery of her shame...

She felt perfectly certain that she would have spoilt all their chances of ever getting the dog; wished bitterly that she had stopped at home!

At breakfast Donald the Shearer's only comment was, 'We better leave him be for a night or so — give him a rest cure as 'twere.' But Chum knew that he was disappointed in her.

As, later, she sat brooding on the tank edge with her head bowed to her arms, she felt Young Donald's hand on her shoulder:

'Chummy.'

'Yus.'

'*It weren't your fault.*'

'What's th' sense of talkin' that way? Whose else fault were it?'

'Well, *I* don't think it was your fault!' he cried — adoring eyes caressing her tousled head. 'Listen here, Chummy ——'

'I don't want t' listen!'

'I got a idea ——'

'Well, don't lose it!' said Chum hoarsely and offensively. 'You don't have so many.'

'Listen, Chummy. I b'lieve that if we went out in the ole Ford an' got th' dog howling strong, it's that lonely it 'ud follow after th' car a bit...'

'Maybe it would... But it wouldn't never follow clost enough to be shot, if that's what you's thinking of,' said Chum — interested in spite of woe.

'I know he wouldn't, but you could climb up in that little emu bush near th' big ant-bed an' pot him as he come past!'

'You thought of it — you got to shoot him if there's a chanct,' said Chum, conquering any inward longing.

'I'd sooner you done it, Chummy...'

She shook her unkempt head: 'What gun'll you use?'

Late that night Chum, trembling with excitement, drew the old Ford up beside the tree in which she had left Young Donald hidden, and the headlights showed

the great limp form of the dingo, lying beside the big ant-hill; its open mouth looked purple, and the teeth were bared in a last snarl!

'Young Donald! Oh, where did you hit him?'

The boy's eyes were gleaming and his cheek flushed as if he had been drinking: lit with something of Georgina's dark burning beauty: 'I knowed I had to get him Chummy — I'd made a wish! I just *knew*...'

Next day Mate asked Old H. B. for half the reward, because, he said, if they had not got the dingo 'nicely tamed,' no 'fool car hunters' would ever have got it.

Old H. B. started to decline, but Donald the Shearer, regarding the strange, withered figures, said gravely:

'There be truth to that — bein' shot at by Mate an' Cap'n *would* tame a dog, as you might say — I vote as Chummy an' Young Donald an' me are satisfied with half!'

Mate said, 'Least you could be!' and Captain, bringing up the rear, said, 'Least he could be.'

And Mate answered: 'Aye, Lad!'

'What says yer, Chummy?' asked Old H. B.

'Fine and O.K.'

'An' yer, Young Don?'

The boy's face was dark with anger, his hands clenched. '*I say I won't give it erway!*' His black eyes swept the group about him defiantly; the blood flamed in his cheeks.

'Why should we give it erway — they *didn't* earn of it?'

A sudden pink astonishment came into the faces of Mate and Captain. Pain twitched at Donald the Shearer's lips.

Little Chum stepped forward fiercely: 'You mean sneaking cow!' she cried with high indignation. 'You beetle of a thing!'

'A third is his, thee knows, Chummy,' said Donald the Shearer gravely. 'Though — well, men has different ideas o' things.'

From her pocket Chum drew a crumpled wad of notes — and thrust them into Mate's hands. The man followed her example — still without looking at the boy.

The boy, with head held high, strode away into the dusk.

An hour later, Chum leant, weeping stormily, on the cow-yard fence, and Young Donald stood ruefully behind her.

'Why,' said Chum hoarsely — 'Why *did* you done it? Just when you been so clever an' so won'erful... Then you had to go an' be so mean... Oh... Oh. Why did y' go an' mess everything? I don't want to speak to you again, *ever!* I hate you!... Why, the're that *old*...'

'I don't care how old they is!' Then his defiance broke: 'It were to buy you a present, Chummy, I wanted all th' money!' he cried miserably. 'I thought of it when I was shootin' th' dog an' *all*... That was what I *wished* — as I would get it for you! An' I didn't know you thought I been wonderful! I never dreamed you thought ——'

'I didn't,' said Chum decisively. 'Who said I did?'

XXX

The year which followed the one in which Sary lost her bullocks was very dry, but with its close came rain. And there was more rain throughout autumn and winter; mild, strange rain which left a steaming, growing world... So that just as the last summer of the Great Drought had fallen, with added blight of heat, an additional stringency of light which seemed incredible, the year of Old H. B.'s eighty-second birthday reached its springtime with a vast additional tide of plenty, a last wave-crest of abundant growth, tumultuously upspringing to the sun in final ecstasy bloom, of mellow scented warmth which melted to soft rain and broke in glittering mist above a glittering world, arched by dissolving rainbows, whose ends were plunged in shimmering gold and silver of tall grasses stirred with the pushing of new flowers.

And as the sun brought these to pollened fulness, and the world grew heavy with its own fruition, weary with scented heat and flowering, slow thunderstorms swung their celestial watering-cans across the great garden of the earth and left a world refreshed for new growth and scent: until every breeze brought a thousand perfumes, which became one perfume vast and warm, and stirred to slumberous buzzing a thousand bees and wasps, and lumbering, climbing, things... And as men rode, the pollen of a thousand grasses dusted them and there came to them the singing of a thousand birds, and the other thousand-million tiny sounds that make a vast sound, the

oldest sound and newest in the world—the sound of growing things!

There came a shimmering beauty to Tharlane such as Old H. B. had never expected it to wear again—the old proud beauty of its freedom, an even fuller loveliness than that which it had worn in the long-past spring when he had sat beneath the slow-falling currajong flowers.

His hundred and ten thousand sheep nibbled out fatness from the rejoicing acres and made no slightest mark upon them. The flowering miles might have blown wholly to the glory of God, and for no purpose or service of man's, for all trace the sheep flocks left.

... The grass-seas rolled above woolly backs in grainlike richness, so that, save when the sheep came in to water, only a quivering of grass-heads revealed them to anything save the swinging eagles!... Plants grew as they had never grown in the memory of any man, save Old Tom Dinnervon (who, men believed, had lived for a hundred years, but did not believe in anything else)... There was crowfoot higher than the pony fences, and in the water-courses gold everlastings rose level with a man's face on horseback!

When normally a grass stood two feet or three, it now stood four and even six. And the spaces between the stems of the tall-growing grass-giants were filled with more tender grasses which leant upon them, and about them all twined tiny unexpected vines... The land was bright with colours of flower and bird, their gayness like that of fine embroidery on a grey shawl, or gems flung on grey velvet of silver-seeding grass: now a sudden blue of minute crowfoot flowers; an orange splash of shining everlasting; black matrix of a clamorous crow flight...

Yet although there was colour everywhere, it was so richly blent, so beautifully woven with the many-headed mosaic of the sweet-seeded grass that it was still a land of grey and gold and russet and silver, across which Old H. B. looked as he rode...

And in this blooming and ripening and glowing of the land there was still a sweet and ordered rhythm, reminding Old H. B. of an appointed procession of his earth's familiar children for once in gala dress.

As first heralds, the big mushrooms, lined with cream and flesh and brown, had come up about the cow-yards... while there hung a strange haze through the trees veiling the sparkling box to more magic silver twinklings and making the distances farther: a great warm haze, more silver than the blue smoke-haze was, as though the million growing things shook from themselves some visible aura of growth into the warm tenderness of the air.

Each rainfall had left the sky more faint and far and tender — each had brought its own flowers...

After the fourth rain the death-white spider-petalled lilies had sprung up even on the open plains: in ones and twos by the corners of the sandy grey-fenced sheep-yards; in delicate scattered beauty by the clear-watered dams; in star-drifted legions along the winding water-courses; as strange, sweet-scented white faces shining gallantly from the grass of the plains — like pearls sown on the grey tapestry: or simply as invisible perfume in the great grass-seas of the kangaroo flats...

... And then, instead of this spring wonder passing to the grey-burnt, smoke-hazed dryness of summer, there came warm rains again. While all about the dams shone the ethereal lilac-misting of the flower-

ing swamp-moss, with its million-million soft-varied heliotrope primroses wearing a white collar about their minute yellow-spotted throats; seen only in the rare years of great plenty.

A golden sheen of sunshine lay over the winding clear waters of the overflowing dams, and the flying, startled ducks, and the faded white lily-heads on the green banks, were all reflected... And when across the great palely gold sky, low, more deeply golden-tufted clouds drifted through great columns of light and bars of shadow, they, too, were caught in the untroubled golden mirrors!

The wild bees throve so that, as the little circular saw at Tharlane wood-heap ate and shrieked its way through the hollow-riddled logs, it dripped often with wild honey and splashed it into men's faces...

Everywhere was life and life that crowded life and fed on life.

... And still, when the world was drunk to sleepiness with scent and heat and sunlight, it rained again...

And — holding to Old H. B.'s eyes a voiceless menace — all along the roads and fire-plough trails there came little prickings of green, and the prickings became a film, a deepening veil, and a triumphant verdant carpet of herbage, and after the herbage came true grass, and the grass grew taller so that the roads and fire-breaks were blurred — and then were gone!

Old H. B., who had thought his lands docile beneath his hand, looked at the frenzy of life with heavy eyes and ordered more road ploughs, and shook his fist at the great white spumes of cloud which hung above purple depths of storm as they rolled through

the fecund weather... And even in his sheep-yards grass and herbage rioted, and the penways of the sheds were rank with young weeds...

Then the sky cleared of clouds, the haze lifted from the earth, and, instead of tenderness, the evening hung a million vivid amber lights among the currajong leaves, and the last storm moved away to the south and lay piled in the last light: gold and violet; infinitely far; infinitely clear; domed and caverned and creviced with wonder.

The evening stillness was filled with the soft sound of cow-bells. It was as though the tide of life reached suddenly its zenith and was at rest. Breathless heat shut down upon the land — and the herbage began to curl at the edges and dry a little.

Old H. B. halted all other work to hurry the reclearing of the roads and breaks and the cross-sectioning of the land with fire-plough trails. But when a man owns lands larger than many over which kings have proudly ruled, this work is very slow.

XXXI

The fire-ploughs lumbered endlessly. There were the long days when, through the heat-clear bush, men followed the lumbering machinery along the new roads or down the long boundaries: followed interminably through a hot, sleeping world... Days when nothing much happened and that yet were very good; when Donald the Shearer and Sandy, in charge of the biggest plough, joked and laughed at nothing in particular. And stopped at times, in the lifting of some ant-bed or stump, to exchange quite irrelevant anecdotes, and wipe wet foreheads with big burnt hands made clumsy-looking by heavy labour, and yet surprisingly deft in the making of Johnnycakes, and concocting of clear sweet mutton stews, or toasting wild ducks, shot along the reeded water-courses by Chum and Young Donald, who looked, so the men of the West said, 'terrible as though he might be a poet.'

Days when there was a certain very definite pleasure for these people whose life was spent so close to the land — and who knew the worth of every chain that might bind the indifferent, stubborn earth more closely — in seeing the ever-lengthening broad red sweep of smooth earth behind the plough.

... After the little grubbing, panting tractor, the heavy grader moved with a steady, hushing sound, and lifted upon either side of its broad trail a little undulating, pouring embankment of earth.

And sometimes they crossed watersheds where the kangaroo grass was so high that both tractor and plough were swallowed in its gold and russet, and

only a great trembling wave in the grass showed where they were cutting their long red ribbon.

When the grass was very thick, the tractor had sometimes to haul the plough back and then through again, until the road-ribbon was cut as sharply between the tall, straight-standing grass-walls as though a great razor had been stroked through them, shaving down to the earth's red skin. Or sometimes, if there was no danger of the fire getting away, they would light the grass to save time, and the dancing orange tongues roared and crackled high in the fierce sunshine and all the bush beyond reeled through the thin, frail blue haze of grass-smoke...

And after the fire had died, there were masses of the fluffiest, blackest ashes, still keeping the forms of tussocks and a semblance of some charnel grass-growth, with the blue films of smoke twisting up to the intensely blue sky.

... And there was the dust page of the road to read, with its fox and sheep and bird traceries, and occasionally the excitement of finding a dingo track...

Or, perhaps as they dropped down onto the tall-bulrushed reaches of the Deep Creek, they would see a great red kangaroo watering with his mate at a clear stony shallow, and Donald the Shearer crept along through the false kangaroo grass until he could get a clear shot, then dropped the 'old man' from the shoulder at four hundred yards! And they would bring his great carcass home to the star-roofed camp; the old car springs groaning under his three hundred pounds. Then the elder Donald would cut off the tail, leaving an overlap of some five inches of skin, and into this pocket of skin stuff pepper and salt and sliced onions, and then put a twitch of tie-wire round

the end of the pocket, so that none of the goodness might escape, and bury it in the hot ashes. And next day, when the fifteen-pound tail was cold, it skinned like an ox tongue, and was full of both jelly and flavour, and more tender than any chicken!

The Ox, who did most of the other cooking, and also looked after the washing-up and moved the camps, was a little jealous because everyone liked Donald's kangaroo tails so much. But his displeasure never lasted, for he was always so impressed by the stories the others told, and the ease with which they could reckon up the miles they had made in the week, and remember the names of different parts of the tractor!

He admired nearly all his friends, and was fond of saying how bright Chum was, or how good a shot Donald was, or that Sandy had a big sense of direction. No one very greatly heeded this, even as no one was much surprised when, after setting out the supper things, he would go silently away to bed himself because the pain hurt him so that he could not feel hungry.

... And the days came and the days went, as they do only in the Outlands of the world: and one was so like another that men lost track of them... And the red ribbons of the roads crept on and on across the pale shimmering face of the landscape under its brilliant sunlight.

The red flush deepened with pure health under Chum's brown, smooth skin, and light played in the clear-shining green-grey of her eyes under the little determined brows that were too straight and too low for beauty, and that drew her little brown forehead into a crease just between them.

Sometimes Young Donald picked her little bunches of dried grass plumes — but Chum preferred the grasses as they grew!

And the sunny days marched and marched, and the plough cut its swishing way through the tall grasses, amber and silver and russet.

Always there were new things to see... or old things dear with familiarity.

In making a new cut, they came one day to a little bluff all sprawled with the almond creeper, and in the bluff-face there were dark shallow caves extending far into the soft rock, and the traces of many, many kangaroos, and the marks where they had scratched and licked at the rocks. There were smooth arches and tunnels and long tubes leading away into the dark, and all about them the kangaroo tracks, and right in the back of one cave there was an old rubbish drift with the bones of kangaroos in it!... And Donald the Shearer said that the whole caves had been licked out by them.

'... An' that makes you realize as the earth's pretty old,' he added, looking up under his fierce gorilla brows. 'It takes a while to lick the rocks away! They was most likely a-lickin' here when the Christ was crucified... an' considerable before that... when there was writin' on the palace wall, maybe, an' the pyramids was buildin'...'

After he had moved on, Chum and Young Donald stood looking at the rocks... With sheer dread of the marching centuries in his eyes the boy said: 'It's horrible, Chum — their lick, lick, lickin' here while all that happened...!'

'Rubbish,' said Chum sturdily. 'They didn't have to lick!'

He said, 'I'm afraida livin' sometimes!'

Chum had no rosy misconceptions about life, but she said, 'I reckon it's all right if you keeps your peepers open, Donald...!'

... That night they worked late, and the world was grey and black with moonlight before they reached their camp-site on the Deep Creek.

When they were near it, Donald the Shearer said: 'I'll go up a tree for a bit, friends — an' see if I can howl a dingo round! It's a night for huntin' as would raise th' dead an' start 'em usin' their harp strings for snares!... You four go on an' pitch camp.' And having found a forked box tree to his liking, he established himself overlooking the road, clear under the cloudless moon.

Chum, Young Donald, the Ox, and Sandy went up through the disused Creek Horse Paddock — hearing the far snort of the brumby stallion as he hurried his stolen mares away! Then round the old stockyards they dropped down to the creek-bars and spread the swags on the ribbon of short couch grass which ran parallel with the dense tall ranks of bulrush.

The Ox painstakingly prepared a fire so that it would be 'right for grillin'' in the morning. Then he carefully selected the place for his own bed... a little way from the others — so that he would not disturb anyone if he was restless. First of all, he scraped the ground free of stones, then from a young box tree broke quantities of springy branches and laid alternate armfuls of them running from head to foot, and from side to side of his couch, until he had a buoyant mattress of flashing leaves.

He always prepared his resting-place with this

elaboration, and always smiled with a child's delight when he stretched his great length upon it... Its caress being perhaps the only one he had known.

To-night, however, the pain came to spoil his pleasure and he had to lie very still...

When the fire flamed up, Chum curled happily into her swag, and Sandy tucked the flap about her with clumsy tenderness.

The boy carried his swag farther up the creek.

'Poor Donald in the tree...' Chum muttered sleepily; then, pulling up the blanket until there was only a little breathing-hole left, she slept.

Sandy sat for a while at the head of her little tumbled heap of bedding. The fire warmed his back and as yet he felt no tendency to sleep. He was tired: not with the sharp, strained tiredness of mental exhaustion, but with the great, glowing lethargy that follows physical effort where there is plenty of air and rather more than enough sun. The skeleton box trees in the creek-bed, and the velvet-plump, tall-speared, seven-foot wall of the reeds, leapt in and out of the great gusty firelight. Scents of grass and dust came to him... He thought, sitting with his hands beneath his chin, of the great strangeness of human life, its eagerness and effort and restlessness, and violence of pain, played out in the equally strange, unfeeling world of dust and frost and scent and dying moons... When the moon went down, the stars would renew their legions... Worlds on endless worlds with other suns and moons, joys and agonies of their own. ... He wondered, with old pain, if anywhere in all the infinities of night his girl-wife still was? Or if all that remained of her little blunt hands and sweet dresses and joy of life was his remembering and the

child sleeping at his feet?... Surely somewhere — and yet whither? Questioning the strangeness of Death and what it was...

At first, when he came back from the darkness of hating, to find Chum sitting, small and fat, on the old log where the everlasting scents blew in from the twilit Common, he had, at those times when Chum's chubby comfort was hidden from him, thought of it with passion of penitence and reiterated and very foolish longing; crying silently to his love in the loneliness of night, with his face against his arms, telling of his loneliness; entreating that she come back — as he knew she could not come. Then, through all happiness in Chum's growing and independent business, he had thought of it with the sickness of long, slow pain, wishing from the depth of much-brooded grief that he had never known the lost sweetness that he would always want — only to repent of the treachery that could wish her, the lost love, never to have been. 'I didn't really wish it — never — Marthee!'

Now after twelve years he thought of it only with the regret that was almost wholly sweet, so woven with tenderness it was.

A man who lives in many rooms may forget a lovely thing stolen from one of them — a man who remains in one room will miss its beauty always. Sandy lived as he had always lived — and remembered! Yet he would not have parted with his memory for anything the world held.

He handled memories as a loved rosary is held by the rough hands of a peasant.

He had loved Martha, because of her soft cheeks, and her happiness, and because no other eyes had lit up as hers at sight of him — and he would love her

down to death. Had she, his frail and sweet, lived, there might have sprung up between them the sturdy comradeship existing between Donald and his 'Georgina the Mother'! A comradeship that took no heed of the death of beauty and youth, and that carried between the Shearer and his love, each week, the fat, slightly soiled letters, more beautiful in their significance than any scented valentine of lovers...

But he, Sandy, had his memories of the beloved. He could not give her his labour, his kindness, or strength or children — but he had his secret Golden Legend.

... And Chum!

Sometimes in the past, at those times when Chum slept, a small, vivid, live thing in the firelight that wavered over the room which Martha had kept so pretty and that was now so untidy and oddly littered, he had come and sat on the floor beside her stretcher and leant his head against her small hard hand.

Sometimes, when he was sure that she slept very soundly, indeed, he even kissed her.

It was a certain grief to him that Chum never offered to caress him... Just once, as he had sat beside her, she had come sleepily across the pillow and rubbed her little soft-fluffed head against his face... And the warm, secret sweet of it and the trust of it and a poignant, indefinable beauty had gone with him for days. He wished that she might do it again; that she would of her own accord kiss him sometimes... And yet Chum was so solid and so independent that he was almost embarrassed by the idea!

No, he was not unhappy now, nor wroth with life. To himself he expressed it that he had got his bearings again...

Feeling the coming lethargy of sleep, he shook his wide shoulders, rose with the sudden ease of perfect strength, and taking the kerosene tin bucket went down to the pool by the fence where the trampling stock had trodden away the grass. Rinsing the tin, he threw the water behind him and it lay on the ground like corroded silver; then the thirsty earth drank it and there was only a darker stain in the moonlight.

Things were swallowed thus, thought Sandy, often. ... Having stood the water by the fire, that it might be hot when Donald returned from his hunting, he rolled in his blankets, and in the interval before he slept he thought again of Chum, and it seemed to him that she was safer in the bush than Martha had ever been, for Martha, with her little frills and smooth hair and pale face, had never belonged to it. He thought dimly that that perhaps was why he had loved her so — and why the West had killed her... It wasn't meant for rose flowers... small white roses under the moon...

He said: 'I mustn't be thinkin' of you always, love — I got things I must see to...'

But when Donald came in half an hour later, walking softly that he might not wake the sleepers, he noticed that, although he had not bothered to undress, Sandy was smiling, and wondered what it was about — and guessed.

For, as Donald the Shearer had once explained to Georgina, 'If a man serves an' loves a livin' woman, there's sweet give-and-take betwixt they; but, if he loves a Dream Lassie or a Memory One, he gives all o' his heart an' makes the answer to his own need... a sweet temptation as drinks a man's days!'

The Ox's fire had crept along the old log against which he had built it, and, having fired the heart, began to flame from the hollows of the broken branch-ends.

The Shearer stood watching it for a moment, his hands on belted thighs... thinking of Sandy's marriage and its end.

'We be crushed out with surprising roughness at times...' said Donald the Shearer, then he flung his great-coat back over his great shoulder with the careless grace of a cape and, turning, moved away to rest. '... Roughly... most roughly!'

But had he known it, a man had lately died — very softly! For while Sandy sat dreaming by the fire and Donald was still in his tree, the Ox had finished with the pain in his chest and died unobtrusively as he had lived.

Above the camp throughout the night the old log lifted its candelabra of flame, burning above those who would wake for a certain number more of dawns, and him who would wake, and sweat, and fear, and joy, never any more.

The 'quack doctor' had been proved right at last.

PART SEVEN

XXXII

In the early summer which followed the Spring of Rains, men had begun to say that Old H. B. was ageing, and 'growin' sour like'; for whereas in the past he had perhaps only refused to speak to any one for a day after he lost at cards, now they were apparently rendered invisible to him for a week! Also he slept ill, and late at night Mrs. Henrics, who came down regularly from the selection to care for his house and be abused by him, would hear his ponderous tread as he rolled out to watch the summer sky, dark and many-starred, or the pale vast light of coming dawn. And when she asked him what he looked for, he answered, 'Smoke, fool!'

Then one night when he was handed a letter he opened it with heavy, fumbling apathy, and suddenly his face grew terribly dark with congested blood, and he fell like a struck ox, sprawling on the floor of his great house!

... The letter was from Old H. B.'s lawyer and enclosed another communication which bore the mark of 'On His Majesty's Service,' and stated that 'owing to good conduct through a number of years,' John Terchant had been released after serving twenty-nine years of his thirty years' sentence; that the governors of the gaol regarded him as harmless, but that, as the lawyer had wished to be informed of the prisoner's release, they appended his description: '... Small, withered, and mentally childish, with very white hair, and almost crippled by rheumatism.'

... And the great west wind, the wind of heat, blew with a ceaseless, steady pouring across the world under the fierce, steady blueness of an unclouded sky, and the tall grasses mellowed sweetly and became wheat-ripe, and became dry at the tips, and then dry to their middle joints, and then to their roots; the tender grasses, which had leant upon the tall, dried also, in soft silken curls and corkscrews, and crinkled nests of sun-sweet blades. The earth ferns curled and dried, and the red and grey and yellow cushions of fungus became brittle with dryness as they clung beneath the dead logs; and now the great sound of the land was not the pushing sound of growth, but the snaky rustle, rustle, rustle, of extreme dryness.

And as men rode through the grass a fine sunny nose-tickling powder-of-dryness rose to them, instead of pollen, and the whole world smelt of dried sweet hay.

The little mobs of sheep, pattering discreetly in and out from the waters, made a rustling sound like a great snake moving through the grass, and in place of so many butterflies there were ten million grasshoppers clicking and chirring and whispering dryly through the grass forests, and when a hawk dropped into the grass he made a sharp, dry sound. And the heat soaked down through seed and stem and leaf until the ground deep-hidden in grass was hot, and even at midnight, if you parted the grasses to touch it, you found it warm as some live thing... And at dawn the grass was as sweet and dry as at midday, for from the moisture-drained skies there fell not even a drop of dew!

A land of plenty asleep in the sunlight! And the old men kangaroos made themselves warm, secret sleep-

ing-places deep in the six-foot grass of the dry water-courses, and lay on their backs and scratched, and turned over and slept again, in amber warmth of light. And on Tharlane forty thousand lambs were born into a golden world of peace, and stumbled on baby legs to water along little grass paths behind fat mothers, trottingly content...

And Old H. B. let even his lamb-making run six weeks late while his tractors lumbered, and his long-disused bullocks trudged, ahead of his fire-ploughs, to augment the efforts of the tractors. And his working expenses leapt from two thousand to four thousand pounds a month, and still the ploughs seemed to crawl.

To his financiers, under whose sway Arteran's Land had again placed him, he wrote: 'I *must* cut double roads around me boundaries with a half-mile-wide strip between as we can burn. I *must* section me paddocks with cuts.' Whereto they replied that, greatly as they respected Mr. Henrics's judgment, they could not countenance added expenditure upon fire-breaks, as his extravagance in this direction was already greater than that of any manager in Queensland, and that they exhorted him to attend to the marking of his 'wonderfully creditable percentage of lambs.' He replied with an unprintable jest to the effect that to roast lamb it made but little difference.

And he continued his double roads under the names of 'netting improvements,' 'mustering expenses,' and 'general upkeep'; but they crawled and crawled... And between them, when at last the outer ring met about the boundaries, there lay an area larger than many for which kings have died: a great grass forest; inflammable as tinder; electric with still heat.

And now when, on the dead, still days, Old H. B. began burning out the grass-strips between the fire-plough tracks along west and south, there was no sneaking hesitance, such as usually characterizes the commencement of a grass fire; no wisp of blue smoke rose from the amber grass, twisted, thickened, and was delicately licked with orange... Instead, the fire leapt and ran from the touching match in little quivering curls and trails and banners, and fled winking along the ground as though it were liquid! And in an instant a fiery cavern opened amongst the standing grass, a cavern with walls of white and orange flame, roofed with tawny-tossing copper smoke, and floored with short red and gold-deep tongues of fire, as the short grass and twisted ferns burnt to charcoal.

And the fire-walled cavern became a raging torrent with fire banners tossed to the sky. And a mile away the grasshoppers heard it, and rose in their thousands fleeing on glistening wings!

And only the utter stillness of the weather and the care of many men stopped even these little 'safety fires' from leaping the fire-plough cuts and the fire rivers from becoming an engulfing sea... Old H. B., watching them, riding through the grass beside them, and moving his men to the danger-points — his face lit with the red comminglings of fire and sunlight — watched the breaking, reeling fire banners and thought perhaps of a king of long ago who saw the writing on the wall... And he ordered that no man should carry wax matches and no man make a luncheon fire.

Then the winter came down with sparkling nights of stars, and frost after white frost, with icy fingers biting back the last least sap from the leaves, the

last vestige of sticky sweetness from the grass-stems, so that for all the abundance of fodder the sheep began to lose condition. And at last the grass-leaves became so dry that they would break at a touch to a hundred sharp fragments in the hand.

At night there were so many stars that it seemed to Chum that you could scarcely see the sky, and a dingo howling miles away woke echoes that shook and shook and came back and back under the cold crystal dome of stars! And the grass was frost-withered to its very roots, and than grass dried by the frost there is nothing drier in the world.

By day the sky was so blue that the white ibis leaving the last chill puddles were like handfuls of snowflakes, sinking slowly in fathomless blue water.

And still the sheep, hungry now, could make little impression upon the million tons of fodder. It was too high above their woolly heads, too interwoven for their slight strength.

Yet the winter progressed eventlessly... and with eventless months Old H. B. began to hope again!

The absence of summer storms had stood his friend as had the stillness of winter and autumn; which had made possible the burning of the breaks. Tharlane was now safe from fire from without, along west and south. The fire-plough roads were creeping in a mighty cross through the heart of The Block. With Sandy Barwon and Donald the Shearer in charge, they were cutting a cross-section over the mighty 'L' of Tharlane itself, and Luther was winding his ancient bullocks up the Old Coach Road through Arteran's Land. Also the cattle were cutting wide grass-paths in and out of water... Another two months and he thought that he might see safety again, freedom from

debt with the shearing of his greatest flock, riches with the sale of his 'fats' — yes, with the next lambing, himself a millionaire! Owner of Tharlane, The Block, and Old Arteran's; owner of two hundred thousand sheep; creator of plenty from the wilderness; master where all men had failed...

'I could die then... Me work's done!' he wrote. But as he lumbered about on his old grey horse, there was nothing of finality in his thoughts; they leapt on and on to the richer future — to new methods of grassing, of rotational burning, of mustering by enclosing the waters with dog netting-fences, so that all things which came to drink must pass through gates. ... In his diary he made notes of their advantage. You could close the gates and the sheep from all the surrounding country would congregate bleating without them, waiting in woolly wonder for their opening, and men could ride from one to another of the watering-enclosures and drive in the sheep and then reclose the gates, waiting for the next comers, and thus one man could do the work of twenty.

... His great victory was almost won, and he was bent upon the ramification of victory — there should be no further debt, no further risks! If — if — if...

If the storms held off and no man dropped a careless match — or a malignant one — until the cattle and the fire-ploughs had done their work, then he was safe for the enjoyment of conquest; the reward of the years!

If the Little Man did not come back to avenge!

He had no personal fear — it was for his land that he feared. But soon, very soon, he could laugh at retribution — for the land would be safe again!

He breathed wheezily of the winter air, loving his land with the depth of his being, his every desire rooted in the beauty and the richness of his land: loving its every acre, its warm fecundity of soil, its heat and cold, growth and drought, its utility, its beauty and savagery!

Six months had passed since the letter's menace stretched him unconscious upon his floor... He whistled, twiddling his grey bristling moustache, as on the first of September, he rode slowly down the bed of the Deep Creek shrunk with dry weather, but still trickling in a succession of pools from the Seven Bore: a succession of shallow still brown pools, some wide, some narrow, bordered with soft frost-bleached couch grass.

His creek: his winter sunlight! He noted its each detail as he had always noticed the least details of the natural world. On the creek-banks, and leaning in places over the water, were big broken box trees, with round brilliantly gleaming leaves and greyish-white trunks. In the bigger pools there were soft-grassed islands, and capes all covered in bleached couch, and here and there a reach or peninsula of round red stones...

The sky was incredibly, radiantly blue, but where the tree-shadows fell on the brown water they were bluer still...

There were many wonderful colours in the water: its own deep amber and henna brown, blue and purple shadows, and paler blue versions of the over-powering winter sky; and then, perfectly clear, but transmuted to wonderful brown, the tree reflections, sharp in every leaf... The whole world was tre-mendously sunny, and still — except for the calling of

crows and an occasional sort of stirring amongst the distant trees. The shallows of the pools beneath the bank burnt with the lovely blooming depths of a moth's wing: purple and amber and radiant deep blue amongst the short pale grass... Sunshine and stillness seemed to roof the little valley.

The brown reflections fascinated the old man and he rode gazing into the water... There grew within the pools reversed brown forests; a sudden flight of little grey-maned geese became in the water birds of brown and amber; as the old man journeyed, he saw reversed tangles of false wattle wonderfully brown. *And suddenly there looked back at him from the water a brown face with strange pallid gold hair tossed about it. For a minute the reflected face was still; then it broke to soundless laughter, and was gone.*

And then, for the first time since he had dragged back upon the reins, Old H. B. looked up... The same silence held the world. The false wattle tangles stood without stir in the sunshine and the pool mirrored them in brown and gold and amber...

But Old H. B. turned his horse and galloped with a thunder of heavy hoofs to a place where the animal could scale the farther bank, and then they plunged together into the false wattle tangles — *hunting for him of the golden face!* And in one great hand Old H. B. held his reversed whip with its heavy leaded handle, and in his small eyes there was anger, for he wanted no wanderers amongst his heat-brittle grass, no one to loose such a fire as slept in it... And the memory of an official letter was with him. In his eyes was cruelty, for nothing makes men cruel as does a great fear.

As he thrashed uselessly through the tall grass and

scrub he burst again, unexpectedly, onto the creek-bank, and saw that which seemed more strangely to fascinate him than the reflections had before... And yet it was only a white-stemmed river gum reflected in the creek as a tree of pale strange gold!

XXXIII

All across the land Old H. B. redoubled his scouts, but although they searched and re-searched, they found — as was to be expected — nothing save the little life-traces of the wild things: the trodden 'forms' of old men kangaroos, a rat's nest, or grass-buried rabbit-roads, and frightened only the kangaroos and rabbits and the grey sheep.

Then with a great whisper and the turn of the year the west wind stirred again after its months of sleeping... And the whisper became a steady breathing which freed the waiting bulrush-floss, and set all the trees dancing their million frost-dulled leaves. And the breathing became the rush of an invisible torrent which tossed little birds, who had thought that they knew all about flying, into unexpected tumblings and upward rushes, and thrilled the old birds so that they fled cheeping and calling from tree to tree, and darted far up into the blue air, giving the hawk-call when there was no hawk in the whole sky.

And the wind torrent grew and grew to a steady flooding cataract of air which drove the season's dead leaves dancing and bursting from the beds where they had lain all winter, and shook the dead bark from the mulgas, and blew to pieces the last spring's birds' nests, or tossed them from the trees and sent them rolling as little pathetic balls along the ground, spilling tiny feathers...

The dust of dry earth and of the myriad particles of dried grass and seed and flower rose into the air

and clouded the sun, turning the sky murky so that a taint of copper lay over the world at midday; and as the sun sank, he became a rosy copper ball hung in a murky-lilac sky, and the wind roared over a world seemingly lighted from within by a strange copper-pink which veiled its grey and hung across every distance... and then the wind roared on in darkness.

And all the night was filled with strange shakings and flappings and beatings of loose things, and with the ceaseless, endless rush of the wind.

The stars were hidden. In grey, dry darkness the wind's bellows fanned the waiting conflagration of the grass.

The great Tharlane Homestead Mill had turned itself out of the hurricane early in the day and was now chained against any possibility of turning in again, but even with wheel and fan lying parallel to the wind the eighty-foot iron tower groaned and shuddered in the night, and the guy-ropes quivered ceaselessly with the strain upon them.

Up the mill tower Old H. B. climbed ponderously and most dangerously through the battering darkness and felt the iron ladder trembling under his feet. At last reaching the observation platform, he seated himself with legs swinging into rushing vacancy, and hands grasping the platform at his sides, his head huddled into his shoulders as a great toad's is. Above him were the stirrings and groanings of the mill wheel. All things below were embraced, engulfed, and seemingly carried away by the wind...

Old H. B. sat there hour after hour, watching the darkness: deafened by it...

Once a tempest-driven bird struck the fans of the wheel, and, after a silence, he dimly heard its dead body drop to earth... He was alone utterly in the great rush of air: suffocated by it, even thought rendered difficult, his coarse skin stung by flying sand and leaves.

He was alone as men are isolated by great wind...

Within him was the sense of having come at last to the end of trails... sharply alone!

He thought of his wife, who would have loved him had she been allowed, and rejected the thought with scorn. Of the many whom he had antagonized — and cared little for their antagonizing (being born to loneliness)... And still he was for the first time aware of loneliness...

In his last letter to his financiers, a letter in which he congratulated them on the effects of economy, he said: 'I set there feelin like the last man, but I can't say as there was any man I ankered for!'

Toward midnight he looked deeply into the grey-black which was the west, then to the east, where all was well, and slowly back to the west again, to see that which brought him to his feet with a curse... Where there had been nothing, there was now a vague glow of rose, as of some false dawn seen from immeasurable distance! A tiny spark of terrific purport!

Old H. B. was on his feet in an instant and lumbering down the shuddering ladder, but before he reached the dusty earth he believed that the rosy light had grown... A rosy flush upon the dust-veiled dark, which was, he knew, the reflection of fifty-foot flames, fifty miles away on The Block!

With mighty strokes he hammered the great iron meal-gong, and its clamour rose above the gale and was answered by the running figures of men and by the calling of startled fowls from the yards and a Babel of dogs... Men lit lanterns as they ran, but already there was a pinkness of that remote dawn on the iron roofs: reflections cast from a tree of fire whose rosy smoke-blossoms were creeping up the sky!

Old H. B. gave his directions swiftly, bellowing above the wind. The Block to the west of the Black Ant Creek must go; he had 'no time to go and flap at a fire-face with a switch.' Donald the Shearer with six men and all the horses they needed could go and see it didn't get from The Block to the Main Run along the South Fence. '... Yer'l 'old it h'if the wind don't shift!'

'It seems kind of awful lettin' the west go,' said the Shearer. 'There's a thousand straggler sheep to th' west o' th' Creek!'

'That be better 'an losin' a 'undred thousan',' said H. B., bellowing to this man and that — the great map of the land he loved spread before the eyes of his mind.

... He stood in the light of a lantern, huge, heavy, bronzed, and masterful, shouting his instructions, the wind whipping his greatcoat about him, his eyes, not on his men, but upon his far-flaming enemy: his mind running swiftly over defences against this risk and that... Tharlane was safe to the north, even should the fire work round, for between him and Sary's grazing-farm were double fire-plough cuts with burnt land between... It was to south and west that danger lay from the burning Block, where the dried grass and roly-polies had been blown over

the tracks of the ploughs... From who knew where — if a little old man with white hair and feeble mind escaped his own vengeance?

Old Tom, bowed beneath his hundred years, paused beside H. B.'s great figure and looked at the redly deepening sky, his aged, transparent hands fumbling with the pipe he could no longer fill: 'I t'ink if any of them 'at loves you, Boss, has setted fire to you as they've most likely roasted fer it — an' I don't doubt as some would t'ink it wert while,' he murmured gently.

'H'm,' said H. B., and laughed, showing the great folds of his throat.

Through the roar of wind and the sounds of shouting and running feet came intermittently the voice of James MacSpee the braggart.

'I can't say as it's unexpected — no! The Boss said to me, "Well, MacSpee, there isn't many as I'd say this to, but I'm expectin' a bit of a bonfire." An' here he lowers his voice an' says, "When, Jim? — that's the point, when?" An' I says to him, as man to man straight and square, "It'll be the night of the big blow, sir, an' *that'll be* ——"'

'Any night as God gives you your voice, Mack.'

'"—— an' that'll be on the twenty-fifth, mark me!" I says, an' he says, "Great God, Jim! When it comes, take charge for me because ——"'

'Because I must have a good man to look after the broody hens while I'm away,' suggested a running musterer.

'"—— because,"' said James MacSpee, leaning far back, his brown whiskers drooping about his seamed yellow face — '"because it'll be a time for a strong hand an' light at the wheel and a bold man

at the lead or she'll get the bit in her teeth an' away she'll go!"'

'May I ask, friend, if you're referrin' to a steamship, the Charge o' the Light Brigade, or a boltin' horse?' asked Donald the Shearer, deftly filling his water-bag. A loose sheet of iron on some roof beat a running drum note...

Only three quarters of an hour passed from the time that Old H. B. had seen the first ominous tree-line rise from the darkness until he was bumping forth in his own car — with men clinging even along its running-board — and yet in this short space half the sky was molten with voluminous smoke, whirled by the wind, and the wind itself was increasingly hot and tanged with smoke.

The outlines and even details of the land were plainly visible in the strange and ominous light. Men saw startled groups of kangaroos sitting still as if carved in copper, their gaze fixed on the unfamiliar west: black, silent flocks of crows passed on stealthy wings through the copper-coloured trees, as they believed fleeing a doomed world. Small mobs of weirdly transfigured sheep, awakened, but not alarmed by the false-dawn, fed and drifted across the wind-scoured, heat-consuming earth...

Strangely varied lights played upon the road before the cars and barred it with spectral tree-shadows; the thousand stars of the box forests were no longer silver but malignant red, like so many tiny evil lanterns tossing and rushing with the gale. But of the fire itself the watching men could see nothing save the ominous sky which reeled and burned and bellied low and parted, revealing further lurid depths of rose-and-copper, dusk-and-gold... An awful sky which dwarfed

the earth beneath and made of men mere ants. A reflection more awe-inspiring than any battlements of flame could have been.

'Faster!' said Old H. B. to his car and his men. 'Faster — we must cut th' dog-fence...'

... As the miles fell behind them there was still no sound save that of wind — and no appearance of actual flame above the black lip of the world. But when at last they reached the great burnt strip paralleling the dog-fence, fleeing bird life began to pass overhead: flocks of little finches driven in twittering, frightened clouds; swift-winged ducks put up from flame-lit creeks; a pair of great eagles like the black forerunners of war; shirring pigeons; doves and quail. A feathered rout, horror-driven and weakened by smoke, leaving their dead broken against the trees and fences into which they flew, but still hastening on.

Once from far above in the strange-flushed sky came the startled music of swans...

'Down with th' fence!' shouted Old H. B., lumbering toward it. 'H'it's down th' water-courses an' h'into this corner as they'll come... Cut free from the posts... The cattle!' Here, where the angle of The Block bit most deeply into Tharlane, men worked desperately at the netting barrier, but long before there were more than infinitesimal openings in the fence-lines, the first waves of the frightened ground things began to wash into the fence corner.

A dingo, red-tongueing and running low to the earth, came first, paused by the unexpected obstacle, rose with his forepaws against it and looked back at the smoke-boiling sky behind him, then scrambled and clawed his way up the six-foot netting, and, heed-

less of the barbed top, plunged over and away... The little foxes came darting through the tall grass and floated up and over the fence like so many bush-plumed cats. Other dingoes, less enterprising than the first, ran cowering up and down the barrier until they found a man-made opening, when, fearless of men too busy to heed them, they loped through... Kangaroos came in their hundreds, panic-stricken, leaping high above the grass and fallen trees. Some saw the fence in time to avert collision with it and reeled away along its length... Some few broke their necks against it and fell quivering in the pad for other fugitives to patter and huddle over. The majority swung along parallel with the line for a few hundred feet, gathered speed, and took off in, what is perhaps the most marvellous leap in the world, the 'sideward' flight of a hunted kangaroo. One after another they performed the miracle. Up ten feet into the air with sideward slant of some five feet, and with break of perhaps thirty feet from the point close on one side of the fence where they took off to the point farther down and close upon the other side where they landed — without perceptible checking of their speed — and swung away to safety...!

Bulging-eyed rabbits began to bob with nervous scutterings up and down the fence-pad, so stupid and so mesmerized with fright that they often passed and repassed an opening without being aware of its existence...

Then above the roar of the wind came a new thunder and a trembling of the ground, the impressive, most ominous sound of hoofs, and down through lurid light and flying smoke came the cattle! Not in questioning disquiet, as Old H. B. had hoped they would

come, but galloping and calling their fright from bellowing, slimed mouths, a horror-crazed, tossing sea of heavy flesh and crashing horns, pounding hoofs and staring, dilated eyes, moving with the force of a thousand tons of living weight... Men who had been seeking to help them sprang back from their path, crouching in forked branches or against tree-butts.

... Red coats gleaming in the lurid light they came bellowing, trampling, crowding; stupid with fear. Many found the fence gaps, and were through. Many more crashed in headlong flight against the uncut strains.

They were stunned against the posts, they were cut and entangled by the wires, they fell and were trampled under, but the fence went down before them, and they went on leaving the dead and the disabled for the night's burning.

'There'll be roast beef h'afore mornin',' said Old H. B. 'Now we'll get back to the far side h'of the bloody cut h'an' wait fer th' fire!'

And now the fire topped the timber-line of the horizon showing the tree shapes black as some stage-setting against seemingly interminable depths of fire. Men dripped with sweat as they rested, for the wind might have blown from the open gates of hell.

Old H. B. stood for the moment passive, great hands upon his hips, marvelling, perhaps, that so slight a thing as the Little Man could have wrought such flaming vengeance!

Wondering at what knowledge of hatred could have taught the avenger to loose against him the forces of his land, instead of merely threatening his own life — valued so lightly beside his land!

Then to the fire rivers leaping skyward he gave his battle-cry: 'H'I'll try yer!'

His defences were very perfect. Retribution would still find him hard to overtake...!

XXXIV

It seemed there would not again be night or day, nor earth or sky, but only flame... For, as it reached the plough cuts and its forward rush was checked, the fire began to spread more slowly to north and south, in an ever-widening face, drowning the earth in reeling light and smoke, drowning men's voices with its greater voice... Men, dwarfed against vastness of fire shaken above them in roaring banners, kept pace with its spread, watching that it did not leap the ash-strewn space of the break or creep out along the drifted grass-wreck... The wind had moderated a little now, and the watching men beheld the varied drama of fire! Here a great mass of kangaroo grass fired, and the flames shot up in shaken banners sixty feet toward the copper and rose of the sky, reeling, flapping, shaken as are silken banners... Breaking from the parent flame of their own force and flying upward in isolated sheets of flame, to be lost in their wild flight amid the smoke... Shaken surfs and great toppling billows of fire leant out across the burnt land between the plough cuts, seeming that, as breakers of the sea, they must fall in fiery, thundering surf upon the minute men gasping in their refracted heat...!

Then, as the tall fluff of the seeding grass was consumed, the fire fed back more slowly, with a more rosy light across the tangles of dried growth beneath. And, while the first burst of flaming had been practically smokeless, there now sprang up involuted, woolly spirals of blue and dun smoke, twisting and billowing in marvellous dance of reflected and veiled colour, lilac and pink, rose and grey... And through

this veiling and smouldering gleamed the wildly flickering shapes of the burning trees... Now revealed by the parting smoke and seeming decked to the twig ends in fluttering captured stars... now dimly seen as if clad in rosy lanterns.

Within the walls of fire were many colours, whirling, reeling, interlocking, melting, quivering to light which was colourless through its own intensity. Men perceived for the first time the differences of hue with which familiar woods burned...

Through the engulfing roar were also diversities of sound: hissing, crackling, whistling, running reports as boiling sap burst the fibres of consuming trees; great washing sounds as fire tides rolled across seas of grass, frenzied flappings of leaves... Now, as some dead tree caught, its twigs, red-hot and sparkling, were hurled upward by the force of its combustion, not unlike goldfish swimming in a strange dark sea.

Men's eyes ached with splendours of light and stung with smoke. Their skin felt raw, and their lips cracked. They were deafened and exhausted by ceaseless noise.

And at intervals the grass, standing, luridly lighted and curled with heat across the fire-break, was ignited. Now by some trailer of blazing bark carried upward by the force of the fire, now by flaring balls of horse manure which shot surprisingly out from the main conflagration and rolled smouldering and skipping before the gusts. Men rushed upon the resultant flares with drawn faces and struck them down with the strength of fear.

To Old H. B. came his neighbours as the hours passed, the holders of small selections and farms, who

had been too poor to fire-plough or had counted themselves safe in the shelter of Tharlane. Rugged, deliberate men most of them, who would have come to help whether or not their own safety depended on the issue.

First to arrive was the Drover Abel Crosset, with his youngest son Binny, born at the death of the Drover's wife fifteen years before, and the light of the Drover Abel's days. A strangely clad, strangely nourished little being, inseparable from the Drover as his shadow.

Now, the Drover Abel, trailing his fire-lighter lest the need of burning fresh breaks arose, rolled from his famous Ford toward Old H. B.

'I suppose you're surprised to see me here, H. B.?' said the Drover, his beard curling and snowy, his blue eyes belligerent.

'I h'expected yer,' said Old H. B., writing directions to be carried to Donald the Shearer, and shouting to his nearer men of danger-points, of seeming changes of wind.

'I suppose you thinks I only came because me Blue Tip Wheat would go if the fire got by?' said Drover Abel. 'Well, you're wrong! I wouldn't see even a damned goanna lizard burning without giving a hand ——'

'H'I know that,' said Old H. B., sealing his letter with a heavy thumb. 'You're one h'of them kind-'earted, 'elpful men...' Whereat the Drover's wrath choked him, and, crying to his offspring to follow, he plunged away along the face of the fire.

To H. B. came Sandy and Chum, Chum's eyes aflame with excitement, her slender, trousered figure bending to the weight of the water tins they had brought...

Also Old Earwig and his sons, and Georgina, darkly capable, mounted surely on a young wild-eyed horse — having ridden nearly a hundred miles through the veiling smoke to help cook for the fire-fighters.

For twenty hours they held back the flame-floods along the boundaries of The Block and along the Black Ant Creek.

Then — as at last the fury of burning began to moderate a little, and instead of shaken banners of fire which leaned in awful surf above the ashen path of the 'break,' there was more of smoke and the glimmering lanterns of smouldering trees — then, stumbling through the flame-light, Binny came running to Old H. B., wiped the smoke-tears from his reddened eyes, and pointed wildly to the east! Behind him lumbered the Drover Abel Crosset.

'Some damned Russian I.W.W. Bolshevik's *firin' it!*' cried the Drover Abel, pointing to the east. 'Some piebald American agitator, some sausage-eating German, some scheming yellow Jap!' shouted the Drover Abel, to whom there was but one race of men upon the earth and they the subjects of King George. 'Some crawling Asiatic thing!'

For a while they saw only reeling smoke, then it lifted, and against the pallor, which showed that somewhere beyond the smoke-palls it was day, they saw, orange and dun, a column of new smoke climbing — miles away, but even as they looked, swelling and reeling to the again rising wind...

'We're with you, H. B.!' cried the Drover Abel, wrath at this treachery, of which his enemy was victim, drowning the hate of half a life. 'We're with you! We'll beat him yet, the infernal louse! We'll

beat him yet, whatever God-forgotten country he came from...!'

'H'it's this side h'of the next fire-breaks — 'e's made that much mistake!' said Old H. B. slowly.

And, so stiff that he could hardly step over the charred sticks in his path, he led the procession of weary men to the waiting cars and horses.

Began again the interminable-seeming progression across a strange world, seemingly lighted from within, under a stranger sky... Again they saw the dance of the tree-shadows on the road before them...

North they went and east, and at last were level with the tossing, lurid lights of the new fire, and turned to head it off along the last stronghold of the division cuts... But now men were less confident, and so drunk with weariness that they slept in the jolting cars, even while before them shook a menace which threatened all their life's work... So tired that they almost fell upon the necks of their smoke-dazed horses... Also, now that they knew it was not merely with Nature that they strove, but in addition with something human and consciously malignant, their courage was weakened. Their eyes wandered from their upleaping foe before, to look restlessly behind and to the east, lest even now another fire made their work useless... Only the Drover Abel Crosset and Old H. B. himself seemed uncowed.

'Bah!' cried the Drover Abel. 'What's a little blaze like this? Wait till you see the Gulf Grass burn! Wait till you see a Gipsland forest fire...! Why, Binny an' I'll have this out ourselves afore you get your eyes open!' And Binny, swaying against the Drover's mighty shoulder, muttered sleepily: 'I'm comin', Dad!'

Then Donald the Shearer came up from The Block.

'I seen this new sparkle,' said he of the golden tongue. 'I seen it, an' I said, this little bit o' country must take care o' itself! They're waitin' up there on Tharlane an' lookin' an' cryin', "Where's Donald the Shearer? The man who if he do one thing better 'an another can fight a fire?" I said, "I best go put it out for 'em!" I said ——' And to Georgina, boiling coffee, with her eyes watching the fiery sky, he whispered, 'I'll win this fight, Georgie — just watch thy Donald!'

Men drank the coffee, holding their pints in stiff awkward hands, and began to take heart again... And then, with each movement pain, went back to work, following Donald, Drover Abel, or the figure of Old H. B., where he lumbered and swore and urged and wheezed. For all Old H. B.'s weariness seemed to have passed now that he was at grips with the new fire. There was a note of exultation in his bellowing orders. His clothes were in rags, his eyes bloodshot, one great arm was burnt to raw flesh, but he took no heed.

Those watching him now saw only the greatness of the man.

The division fire-cuts were merely single narrow plough-tracks; therefore the one hope of holding the fire was to start smaller fires up the wind to burn down onto the cut, beating these small fires out with branches if they leapt across — the heart-breaking cruel labour of 'flapping at a fire with a switch!' Men laboured until they could work no more, for their limbs ceased to obey them, looked at the fire where it swept down upon them, and, knowing all it meant to them, fought again. Or fought merely at its chal-

lenge. Or fought because it is the inherent nature of men...

'Why?' said Drover Abel, pausing beside Old H. B. — 'why was he so bloody long startin' this next blaze?'

'Maybe 'e weren't a fast walker!' said Old H. B. 'Or maybe 'e was takin' a nap!' In his mind the phrasing of an official letter: 'Frail, mentally childish, with very white hair, and almost crippled with rheumatism.' To his eyes it brought a savage joy — for such a one might once escape his own vengeance, but hardly twice!

... Their fire-break widened and lengthened, yet it was still but a fraction of the miles that must be guarded. Men saw again the fleeing procession of ground life, mixed now with the foolish cohorts of the sheep. The great fire advancing reached the newly burnt ashes of the break, reared beside it, leaned above it in fiery surf, which seemed that it must fall as waves of the sea, and then began more slowly to make its way along the barrier from north to south.

Again men saw the drama of fire; the variousness with which familiar things burned.

But they looked at these things less often, for now their work was not merely one of vigilance, but a race with fire against greater fire. They hurled flame as defence against flame, and then must wrestle with their servant. But by that night, as they passed each other, singed, reddened, blackened almost to unrecognizability, they cried in hoarse voices: 'She aren't past us yet!'

XXXV

STANDING in the glare of a flame-devoured world, Old H. B. was suddenly aware of a gigantic, battered figure at his side, one glass eye flashing reflected fire, the other shining with a beaming, all-oblivious delight, which had not been in Luther's face since the death of the Ox.

'I hopes you're not catchin' a chill, Haitch B.,' roared Luther.

'Catchin' a chill?' asked he, who saw the years which flickered and went up in smoke.

Luther revolved slowly. 'I'm very warmly wrapped meself,' he shouted. 'Mrs. Barwon sees to that!' He waited to observe the effect of this startling information. Fumblingly he removed his oddly fashioned greatcoat. 'You don't need two eyes to see as I'm a married man,' said Luther, proudly displaying darns and patches. 'I'm that fussed over it's a bother!' he added, getting back into his coat.

'Mrs. Barwon fussin'?' said Old H. B., his attention recalled momentarily from infernal sky and fiery wind.

'Yes,' said Luther casually, preparing to move away to his water-wagon. 'She's terrible careful about me... Won't let me take a job on a station, won't let me go on the roads... "Just you stay at home with a lonely old woman, Luther," she says, "an' you'll live like a lord." She's a uncommon good woman is Mrs. Barwon,' remarked Luther complacently. 'And that *affectionate!*'

Old H. B. smiled grimly — thinking perhaps that

it was not only to him that the years might bring fall of pride and wreck of power!

'You makes me jealous, Luther,' he said, and turned to answer a stuttering half-caste boy, whom he recognized as a wanderer sheltered for a while by Sary Strathmore. His heavy face grew harder even than before.

'What does yer want, Yellow?' he asked offensively.

The boy pushed a letter into his hands. They stood alone, shut out from the normal world of men by glare and roar of flame, their shadows reeling for seeming miles across the smoke-trailed land.

Old H. B. read: 'Oh, H. B., you have been so good to me, and the fire is coming down on us! Everything will go unless I get men, me sheep and cattle and the fences that there isn't one crooked or hollow-heart post in! An' the house, too, for the grass is terrible high! Oh, H. B., you know there's not a better-built house anywhere, and you said you liked the kitchen better 'an your own kitchen... Oh, H. B., they took the bullics... *Send me men.*'

He looked at the fire to which he had cried, 'H'I'll try yer!' He looked at the negligible half-caste boy, and back at the letter. All his life rose and cried to him, 'Burn it!' All that was combative cried out against a weakening in his battle for a paltry selection—weighed against Tharlane as a grain of sand! Cunning said: 'Who would ever know that I received this letter?... Half-caste boys are liars and afraid of fire. None would know. None would dream...'

None did dream that beyond the veils of smoke the

fire was pouring upon Sary's! His mind whispered within itself: 'We can't save her, anyway!' Then, because to himself he had always spoken the truth which he had so seldom uttered to others, he answered, 'Liar! yer know yer can save 'er — if it's done proper with thirty men or so!'

His mind mapped Sary's land. There was the water-course where the main fire would come — the ridges over beyond Turkey Rise that would burn but little... it could be checked here, turned there...

But thirty men might mean the saving of Tharlane.

Why should he?

In his code of life he found no smallest reason! And yet in strange procession the figures of his world tramped past him in the shadows of thought. Sandy and his puny love (whom Old H. B. had despised), Donald and Georgina, Old Backs — all the soldiers or the victims of his earth-battle, with their varied lives! And above them shone the ungainly figure of Sary, the one whom he had perhaps thought of least! The one whom perhaps he had used most ill! Sary with her pathetic appeal of the goodness he had so ridiculed... Such ungainly virtue... The only appeal in the world to which he would not have been deaf!

Again he marvelled at the depth of this his punishment in plumbing his last pangs of sensation. Just as the Little Man might have killed him, and it would, even as he saw death upon him, have meant nothing in comparison with this loosing of his conquered earth against him — this dire defeating of him in his earth-battle — even so to have been defeated by the earth had wounded him less than this asking of him to defeat himself!

He shook his hands aloft and then stamped the letter into the ground, the boy cowering before him.

He said within himself, not unjustly, that it was madness to try to save one selection when it endangered Tharlane, and Tharlane burning would mean the loss of Sandy's selection, of Drover Abel's wheat, of Old Earwig's fences — of who knew how many small homes 'down the river'? But he knew that with the exception of Old Earwig, not one of these men would have refused the letter beneath his feet... 'Ho! Sary, Sary — why weren't yer a worse woman?' groaned Old H. B.

He struck at the boy and then went lurching toward his toiling men.

'Come h'on! Come h'on!' bellowed Old H. B. above the roar of fire. 'I wants some fools t' come with me t' Sary's place — get a move on or she'll be roast...' His roared instructions were repeated from man to man. He thought of Sary's letter: 'If you gave me another place twice as big it wouldn't be this place, H. B.... If it's burned, I'll kill myself; I'm that old I couldn't go cookin' again, and I couldn't do nothin' else... you don't know how I worked for this place, H. B. — the years of workin'!'

'... Thirty fools!' said Old H. B.

He took with him thirty men; going himself, for, although he knew that he could save Sary's place, he knew that none other of his men could, for no one had studied the possibilities of fire on or about Tharlane as had he; none other knew the danger-points, the points at which fire might be checked or turned...

While the cars were loaded, Old H. B. had sat

passive watching the iron-grey and amber grasses of his land reflect the rosy light from amongst their dark trees and the grey smoke-veils. Even through the all-pervasive reek of smoke familiar odours came to him: of grass and earth... He looked upon a world transfigured and yet familiar, as a lover looks upon the face of his lady in dire peril.

His coarse nostrils breathed the scents as a lover's lips drink the perfume of his lady's hair, in agony of last parting... He snorted like a hard-blowing horse. An old fat man most unwillingly noble — and not too noble at that!

'Ready!' he shouted harshly at last, and then they were under way again, moving down the flickering road.

Again to drive in silence under a sky of fluctuating, reeling rose, of smoke and gold of reflected fire.

It was then that Devil, blind eyes seeking his master, walked stiffly into the way of the cars. Old H. B. swerved, but he did not stop, his soul savage with the sacrifice forced upon him, hating everything that lived. The hind wheel caught the old dog and his yelp of pain halted the next car; into which one of the shearers lifted him, knowing that otherwise he would only try to follow on his injured leg...

Little marked the progress of night and day, but it was the next night before the fire burned itself out along Sary's boundary and went seething away to the north across Strathmore's Station.

Men, weak from exertion, threw themselves down where they had stood... And the sweat chilled upon their aching bodies. Ghost-grey veils of smoke rose

from the ravaged land and drifted over Sary's place — the little fragment they had saved — like a hopeless pall.

Two hours earlier the fire had broken past the division cuts along the back of the Tharlane Spell Paddock: run like shallow water over a barren ridge; reached the five-foot sugar grass of a dried swamp, risen roaring amongst the trees — and was free!

Men meet disaster according to the variousness of their natures. When the fire leapt the last plough-cuts and rose in shaken pillars of tawny, reeling light from the tawny grasses, while the sky rekindled to a wilder dawn, the men stood back and watched it, knowing the fight ended.

With faces blackened with cinders and stained with sweat, suddenly weak after frantic effort, they stood and beheld the miracles of flame with expression whose difference marked what the fire meant to them.

Donald the Shearer, Drover Abel Crosset, Sandy and Chum, the Elgins, all knew that where fences and homes and little flocks had been would be, when dawn came, only grey smoke-wisps rising from the fallen logs.

Donald stood with hands on hips looking out beneath brows that were those of a fighter and said, 'Devil take you, I fear not anything!' — but there were haggard lines in his wide face and pain at his mouth corners. To him came Georgina; the wild night touching her face with something of its old dark mystery of beauty.

He said, 'I've lost the big fight, Georgie — it's the roads again for us two.'

She put her hand through his arm and held it tightly; gusts of drunken smoke rolled about them, crimson gleams fell on her dark dishevelled hair.

'It aren't goin' to make no difference between us, Georgina — all the poverty over again?'

She looked up at him, face transfigured with a light that rolled back the years and made her a girl: 'You might have had a better opinion of me 'an that,' said she. He turned and kissed her strongly, full on the mouth. But she still looked at him searchingly. 'Donald, you remembers that night — when you brought th' comb of wild honey?'

'That I do!'

'You remembers I was goin' to ask you something?'

'Yes!'

'I wanted to ask if you loved me — as much as Black Dan! If you'd 'ave come back if Black Dan hadn't died?'

Then she put her hand on his mouth and smiled. 'No! Don't tell me — I knows you that well I'd know if you lied t' me!'

... When the fire broke past and knowledge of defeat came to the fighting men because there was no other point at which the fire could be stopped by any power of men, only the Drover Abel Crosset had remained fiercely animated.

'Are you comin' — she'll be past us if you don't look lively!' shouted the Drover Abel, grey beard curling, face crimson beneath its grime. '*She'll beat us!*' he shouted warningly, voice rolling amongst the smoke.

'We're beaten now,' said some one gently. 'Sit you down, Drover.'

'Beaten? No!' cried he. 'Faint heart never won

fair lady!... Who's comin' with me? *We can cut it off yet!'*

A strange, small figure in long and corrugated pants, head crowned by remarkable and upright hair, stood at his side: in a voice hoarse with smoke but virile for all patent medicines, Binny exclaimed: 'I'm ready, Dad!'

Dragging his fire-lighter, Drover Abel rolled toward his car.

'Guts is what's wanted — hasn't no one any?' he shouted questioningly. No one stirred. The old man stood for a moment looking from face to face, from the smoking world of grey-and-rose behind them to the reeling world of copper light and living fire before.

Then he sat down on the step of his old car.

'The wheat,' muttered Drover Abel. '... Twenty bushels to the acre of Royal Blue Tip...'

Binny turned swearing in high-pitched voice at the men, poised before them a slim figure of defiance and mockery and despair. Then his voice broke and he went sniffling into the darkness beyond the cars...

Sandy stood some distance from the others: thinking of the strangeness of fire — a flower whose blossoming leaves grey ash where it found life and the many forms of life; a fearful energy that consumes itself! He thought of the labour gone; the toiling over fence and flock; the building and the planning. But he thought in the main of a grave where once an old almond creeper vine had flowered over a dead grey stump! He knew that the maid who slept there could not be hurt any more by the forces of the world or its violences, but he wanted to be with her — to foolishly cover her grave with his body and his spread arms, before the flame tides reached it! And whisper

to her not to be afraid! (For she had been frightened of fire.) He knew these things to be folly; and he smiled twistedly at the thinking of them; but none the less, his heart cried to be there, and to whisper the comfort of his nearness...

He received suddenly with staggering unexpectedness what is technically described in boxing as a 'kidney punch,' and is in all countries that subscribe to the Marquis of Queensbury Rules held as disqualifying. It was a moment, dazed by fire and dreams, before he realized that it was merely the small lean fist of Chum which had administered a love tap.

In a little deep voice, husky with smoke and shouting and weariness, she said: 'We'll go drovin', Sandy — I always wanted to go drovin'.' She blew her nose with violence, and added fiercely: 'Damn the smoke!'

He said, knowing how she had loved the selection and the ponies and the house that was so strangely littered: 'It do get into your throat...'

Young Donald dropped cross-legged at their feet, his face pale with exhaustion: 'I'm comin' too, Chummy...'

Old Earwig, running from man to man, cried of compensation to be paid him, in ever-growing quantity, by person or persons unknown: 'I'll have it!' cried Old Earwig with tears in his voice. 'I'll have it or I'll have their hearts' blood!' Then, looking at the indescribable sky, he would say with pathos of utterly groundless hope, 'It's working to the west of my place — you see, it's working to the west!'

But only over Sary's selection away to the north was there a darkness of the sky which spoke of defeated fire.

It was there that Donald the Shearer came to Old H. B.: both blackened with smoke, hoarse with shouting.

'It's beat us, H. B.,' said the Shearer, swaying against his horse. '... We did our best, but it's past the last breaks...' He gestured toward the south through the grey smoke-veils, and through them shone an ever-growing rosy light like a veiled lamp-glow! 'There she comes,' said Donald. 'It's Georgina's an' my wee place gone, too — an' it's the roads again for me Georgina an' me; still we got each other...'

'Baa!' said Old H. B. 'Baa! Shut your face...' He went stumbling away into the smoke-darkness.

His mind strove to realize that this was ending... for him! He, H. B., was beaten by his earth at last!

He sought barren comfort, raising fierce haggard old face to the flaming south, in the thought that all men who live with the earth see at last their transience in comparison with the earth — and that still they may have marked it!

For, although for him his world went up in smoke, he knew that his work would not be all undone: that like most good work it would in part go on without him — though not in its perfection, not for his delighting, still it would go on! He knew that to bind Tharlane, his fences would rise again, and that the soul of the land would not shake free the clinging fetters woven by the small-footed sheep... And then, even as he saw it, he doubted the purpose of work... Seeing men as small insects that scratched the surface of the earth as over them swept the seasons and the changing skies and mighty suns, as they had been and would be through the countless years...! And doubt-

ing the use of his work, he lost his hold upon life and questioned it; as grotesquely staggering, like a man drunken, he raised aloft his huge clenched hands, and cried, without knowing that from his hoarse bull throat there came sound. Blaspheming and questioning as he went — life and the maker of life.

... Asking life's reason, and from the great smoking basin of the sky and from the reeling battlements of fire receiving no answer — only mockery of an old fat evil man; staggering toward advancing fire, his shadow reeling tipsily behind.

And as he lifted bloodshot eyes he laughed and shook his fists aloft, flinging back the mockery of the gods!

He stumbled through long grass, passed through a gap cut by the fire-fighters in the dog-fence, crossed one of his now useless roads, a width of ashes where one of his breaks had been — another road, and was again entangled by the grass...

Stumbling through the lurid darkness, he heard a feeble scrambling behind him, for Devil, whom he had forgotten, was following him unsteadily, carrying the leg which Old H. B.'s carelessness had injured, and whimpering because he knew the fire was dangerously close, and because his bleared eyes were so dazzled by its light that he was afraid of being left behind... And, indeed, the old man staggered on so fiercely that the old dog was almost left.

Then at last Old H. B., incapable of going further, sat down upon a log, and Devil limped hurryingly up, anxiety for his master in every line of him, as he looked unseeingly, now at Old H. B.'s purpled face, and now at the advancing fire with its steady roar...

For the first time, Old H. B. thought of the years — almost twenty years was it not? — for which Devil had followed, and loved, and fought for, and been ill-used by him? He saw again the old eager blind face in the glare of the headlights and heard the little hard-bitten yelp of the old dog's hurt as the car had bumped him... He sagged farther forward on his log.

The loss of all things he had striven for, the Little Man who had come back to avenge — all these things were blotted out! He saw only a ragged old cocked ear above blind eyes.

'Get h'out!' he shouted. 'Yer h'old fool, get back!' The dog moved in under his threatening hands and, seating himself between his master's knees, he looked timidly into the bloated face, knowing himself unwanted, and yet knowing also dire peril of which H. B. would not be warned. He obviously wanted to go, and as obviously had no intention of going without his master.

Old H. B. caught him and shook him with his nearest approach to a caress: 'Yer poor h'old fool!'

Then he drew from his pocket the revolver which he had carried for a long time past for such an hour as this. It held only one shell. H. B. looked at it — then at the dog — then at the walls of flame!

Then he pressed the barrel to the great rough head and fired. And then, still holding the dead dog between his knees, he sat and watched the steadily advancing fire.

His hands tightening about Devil's jaws twitched convulsively, as perhaps an old Viking's may have when the flames spread under his feet.

On to one vast fist fell the dead dog's tongue, seemingly pouring love's last benediction across all inexplicability of life.

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DOROTHY COTTRELL

who now lives in Southern California, was born in New South Wales and grew up on a sheep-ranch in Australia. She was educated by 'various distracted governesses' and like many other writers first turned to drawing. Confined, for the most part, to a wheel-chair, she regards this handicap merely as a nuisance and welcomes the opportunity it gives her for writing. She drives an automobile and frequently goes off for the whole day with her lunch and her portable typewriter, maintaining that 'a car is perhaps the most delightful thing in a delightful world.' Mrs. Cottrell's first novel, 'The Singing Gold,' was called by the editors of the *Ladies' Home Journal* 'as charming a story as we have ever read,' and described by William J. Locke as 'a book of exquisite beauty and tenderness.'

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